

Presence

Nick Backovic

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy by Practice as Research in

The Contemporary Novel

School of English

University of Kent

August 2019

Word Count: 79,672

Acknowledgements

For all your support, thank you to my mother and father, my brother Alex, Jezebel & the Mansells, my supervisors Dragan Todorovic and Alex Preston, all my friends in Montreal (Howard for so patiently answering all my questions about recording dog whistles) and England (and beyond), and the University of Kent School of English.

Table of Contents

Recording the Impact of Place	4
Presence	18
one.	19
two.	80
three.	108
four.	166
five.	216
Bibliography	252
Appendix	254

Recording the Impact of Place

Introduction

From Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Bloomsday rituals it inspired to Paul Auster's metafictional detective story, *City of Glass*, the history of literary fiction has long been intertwined with the subject of walking the city. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that walking, much like writing or reading fiction, is usually a slow and contemplative act and that it favours the turning of fleeting thoughts into eventual recorded observations. Walking allows a window into a city's subtext in ways that other modes of transportation do not; much like a novel's meaning would be lost if we were simply to skim read or consult its synopsis, penetrating into a city's complex layers and deciphering any real meaning would not be possible in the same way while, for example, riding a train or driving a car.

Moreover, the relationship between the city and its inhabitants is also something that fiction itself has delved into deeply in the past. Works of fiction associated with the emergence of psychogeography, a practice defined as the 'study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment [...] on the emotions and behavior of individuals,' such as the trilogy of J.G. Ballard novels published between 1973-1975, question the effects of modernity on inhabitants of the city (Debord 8). These works share concerns and lineage with the flâneur of 19th-century Paris, a figure whom Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" was among the first to clearly identify, 'who both records and comes to symbolise the emergence of the modern city, [...] and the destruction of his former home' (Coverley 22, 23).

Though psychogeography and flânerie (and, also, simply walking) are not to be conflated and can each certainly exist without the other, they are known for their methods of measuring the impact

of place on people and are often presented as interwoven as they share key common characteristics, such as the *dérive*, or drift. The drift is described as a form of *automatic walking*, a way of penetrating the deeper layers of a city to gain insight on something intangible about the people who live there; with the invasiveness of modernity, however, as well as with the appearance of new construction in the city, walking is seen (by the 19th-century flâneur) as a right that is suddenly under threat, and the focus of the drift later shifts on the reclaiming of the space being lost. With the growing pressures of modernization and faced with the ‘destruction of the city,’ it is said that the flâneur cannot simply remain on the sidelines as an observer and must decide between retreating to his room or engaging in the struggle to ‘reclaim the streets,’ his rise now synonymous with a ‘process of political awakening’ (Coverley 24, 25). To equate all cities, however, as well as to equate all inhabitants, would be to ignore the individuality of both. Changes in a city’s infrastructure, for example, affect the behaviour of inhabitants, who in turn go on to reshape the city; it is precisely in these adaptations that we find the essence of a given city. In *The Language of Cities*, Deyan Sudjic compares the city to a living organism capable of ‘continually reconfiguring itself, changing its social structure and meaning’ and claims that ‘the measure of success is the degree to which it maintains its essence’ (Sudjic 223).

A figure such as the flâneur may have had to decide between reclaiming his space and retreating, but these were certainly not the only options available. The elusive observer of the city has gone through several mutations since Baudelaire. Much like Ballard’s protagonists, the narrator in *Presence* must come to terms with the challenges posed by modernization, in this case within the recording arts, but his loyalty to the analogue recording process becomes something comparable to a tragic flaw, raising the question of whether there is ever a definitive winner between modernity and past. Similarly and by extension, for a character such as Jenn Blake, the advantages of the analogue recording process contribute to her rise, but its limitations also ultimately lead to her downfall.

Whereas in Auster's *City of Glass* the protagonist at first 'becomes' the protagonist of the stories that he writes, then turns into the character he is chasing, the unnamed narrator in *Presence* takes on the characteristics of the city he inhabits, one he at the same time loves and hates, one which he is eager to flee but has difficulty leaving, to the point of becoming a personification of the city itself. The goal here is not to repurpose another search for the flâneur, but rather to examine the evolution of the city's relationship with its inhabitants and ways of recording its impact whilst also observing how this translates into fiction. Through both the early history of psychogeography and the Situationist movement, as well as through notable works of fiction associated with psychogeography, by writers such as Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, and J.G. Ballard, this essay will follow the history of the elusive, observing, solitary figure and explore fiction's way of engaging with the urban environment.

Psychogeography & The Flâneur in the Contemporary

Though psychogeography has received a significant amount of attention over the last two decades, the spotlight has not come without its share of criticism. The origins of psychogeography, both as a term and a practice, can be traced back to 1950s Paris (to the emerging Letterist movement), but the details around its conception, not unlike its definition, are vague. Coverley notes that psychogeography for Debord and the Situationists is 'a tool in an attempt to transform urban life, first for aesthetic purposes but later for increasingly political ends,' an act of reconnaissance in an effort to bridge the gap between the urban environment and its inhabitants, ultimately to understand the relationship between the two (Coverley 14). The psychogeographers of the second half of the 20th century, however, quickly abandon the political aspect of the practice described by Debord in

favour of a more mystical pursuit. Though a direct genealogical line can be traced between the psychogeographers of today and writers such as Sinclair and Ackroyd, this line also ‘bypasses the theoretical framework of the Situationists’ and shares traits with writers who came even well before the flâneur: such as Thomas de Quincey, for example, whose ‘drug-fuelled wanderings’ in search of a north-west passage in the streets of London in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* would earn him the title of ‘first psychogeographical practitioner’; or William Blake’s vision of a ‘New Jerusalem’ to be found within the city; or Alfred Watkins’s *The Straight Old Track*, whose conception of ley lines, these ‘alignments between sites of prehistoric antiquity which provide a means of reading the landscape anew,’ would be a ‘cornerstone of the New Age revival, [...] provid[ing] an esoteric counterbalance to the revolutionary proclamations of the Situationists’ (Coverley 28-44).

If we are to understand the revival that psychogeography is experiencing in the 21st century, having found its way into airline magazines and weekly columns of major newspapers¹, the role of Iain Sinclair’s seminal text, *Lud Heat* (1975), cannot be overlooked. Through a series of entries of poetry and prose poetry that coincide with a gardening position held at a Parks Department in London, Sinclair paints a psychogeographical landscape that cuts across its East London topography via temporal and mystic dimensions using the Hawksmoor churches and their placement to align the present with history and the occult. Furthermore, it is through allusions to the works of writers such as de Quincey and Blake² that Sinclair helps build a foundation for this revival.

Sinclair’s impact on novels such as Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985) is particularly obvious. As it tells two stories in parallel, the commissioning of seven churches in the early 1700s and the investigation of a series of murders linked to the location of these churches by a detective named Hawksmoor two-and-a-half centuries later in a way that suggests that they are intricately

¹ i.e. Will Self’s column, ‘Psychogeography,’ in *The Independent*

² Both de Quincey’s ‘North-west passage’ and Blake’s ‘New Jerusalem’ are often referenced in the psychogeographical canon

connected, *Hawksmoor* sees fiction directly applying concepts worked by Sinclair in *Lud Heat*. Similarly using the East London geography and the placement of its churches as setting, Ackroyd builds a sort of metaphysical mystery, one rooted in a secret history of occult practices. The omniscient narrator, in reference to a recent string of murders, observes that ‘it did not take any knowledge of the even more celebrated Whitechapel murders [...] to understand, as Hawksmoor did, that certain streets or patches or ground provoked a malevolence which generally seemed to be quite without motive’ (Ackroyd 142). This establishes strong links with previous works, reinforcing psychogeography’s take on pathetic fallacy and anthropomorphization of place, one that goes beyond simply giving human emotion to the inanimate by going as far as providing traits of character to the abstract elements of a setting. Ackroyd creates out of London a ‘persona that can be understood by examining its different neighbourhoods as if they were separate characteristics in an esemplastic street theatre, whereby the sentience of the city becomes self-conscious’ (Self, “Introduction,” viii).

Two years before the publication of *Lud Heat*, however, J.G. Ballard would, through a ‘trilogy’ of novels, experiment with some of the concepts found in Debord’s work, using dystopian and sci-fi twists to highlight the effects of modernization. *Crash* (1973) follows symphorophilic fetishists as they stage car crashes for sexual arousal in what could seem a warning about the intrusiveness of technology and mechanization, though the author insists the story is ‘more a psychopathic hymn than a cautionary tale’ (Elborough 187). Ballard’s concerns about humans’ growing reliance on technology, mechanization, and modernization are revisited in *Concrete Island* (1974), a nod to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in which protagonist, architect Robert Maitland, is marooned on a deserted patch off a motorway, ‘among [the] concrete causeways,’ highlighting the lack of survival skills in humans in an age of convenience (Ballard, *Concrete Island*, 37). Ballard notes that ‘there is the need to dominate the island, and transform its anonymous terrain into an extension

of our minds' (Ballard, *Concrete Island*, 4). In *High Rise* (1975), a newly built self-contained luxury apartment complex becomes the scene of a class war between the residents of the lower, middle, and upper floors, eventually leading to anarchy in the building. The wanderers in *High Rise* do not walk the streets but ride the elevators and climb the staircases in their *dérives* to the different parts of *town*, for some of them an attempt to overthrow the social structure. Ned Beaman notes that the high-rise 'transform[s] the moral and sentimental lives of human beings' and has the effect of creating a 'new social type, [...] a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the pressures of high-rise life,' highlighting how Ballard's 'casual deflation of human agency is one of his fiction's most singular qualities' (Beaman ix, x).

A parallel can be drawn between Ballard's characters and the unnamed narrator in *Presence*, whose success as a music producer relies heavily on his use of analogue tape and his resistance to the digital conventions of the modern era. For the narrator, analogue tape represents more than just a preference for a recording format but a conflict in coming to terms with seemingly opposite ideologies that extend far beyond just music. For the narrator, analogue tape means integrity and a forgotten way of recording music that favoured musicianship and authenticity before the arrival of digitization. The digital format, on the other hand, opens possibilities for an easier life for his family and him. The digitization of music is referenced as 'the ultimate generation gap,' one in which the younger generations have fewer reference points to their parents' generation than arguably any other previous gap that defined music; even more so than the generational gaps that came before, the digitization of music also means a radical shift in the relationship listeners have with their music, something the narrator realizes and, to an extent, fears. The narrator finds himself trapped between these ideologies, vacillating from one to another, but the resistance itself is in the end more important than the ideology. Unlike Ballard's 'deflation of agency,' the protagonist's agency is defined by this ongoing internal resistance.

The Problem with Flânerie

All three of the aforementioned Ballard novels use allegory to respond to some of the theoretical work of the Situationists and feature characters expressing their aim to dominate the environment they inhabit, these aims often met with a sense of entitlement and bravado, as if domination is the way to restore the sense of order they once knew. Although these character traits can be understood as simply part of human nature, they also expose certain aspects of the later criticism relating to works of the psychogeographers. The notion of walking the streets (or any environment) in the hopes of taking them back is something akin to a right that was once had and now lost, whilst the fact that these privileges seem restricted to certain types of individuals, is often forgotten or ignored. Albeit briefly, Coverley does note that if the flâneur represented a sense of freedom, he also represented the type of freedom that was only available to men (Coverley 77).

The danger here is, on one side, to accept this figure as a universal concept, while on the other, to deconstruct it to a point that it no longer bears any kind of resemblance to the original. In the preface of the 2018 edition of *Psychogeography*, in response to criticism on the subject, Coverley acknowledges a ‘welcome counter-narrative’ found in Lauren Elkin’s *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (Coverley 11). In *Flâneuse*, Elkin recognizes in the historical accounts of the flâneur a ‘figure of masculine privilege and leisure, with time and money and no immediate responsibilities to claim his attention’ (Elkin 4). A common response to this is that there was simply no female equivalent to the flâneur because it was considered socially unacceptable for women of upper classes to be walking the streets, and that the only women who were doing it were, in fact, street walkers (Coverley 77). Elkin sees in the flâneuse not merely a female version of the flâneur, but a figure in its own right, venturing out to places ‘she’s not supposed to be’ yet ‘keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city’ (Elkin 22, 23). In an article in *The New Republic* entitled “Death to the Flâneur,” Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarkye remain critical of Elkin’s

interpretation of flânerie, suggesting that ‘where [Janet] Wolff and others succeed in making a case for the flâneuse, Elkin does not’:

The flâneur is not the right architectural frame on which to build a politics of what it means to walk around cities these days. In fact, he seems to get in the way of what Elkin is really trying to write about, as if by constantly walking backward and forward he is obstructing her view (Livingstone and Gyarkye).

By no means does Elkin claim to offer a comprehensive narrative; she does, however, help illustrate how the narrative can be revisited from other angles if one wants to demonstrate how there is, in fact, no real clear picture at all, that is, if we up to this point believed a narrative where the act of flânerie was limited to men in Paris and London.

Coverley also claims that ‘in cities that are often hostile to the pedestrian, [walking] inevitably becomes an act of subversion’ (Coverley 16). Hostility, however, comes in many forms and is not equal to all pedestrians. Whether perhaps there are versions of flânerie elsewhere, such as in, for example, works associated with the 20th-century history of predominantly black urban inner-city areas of America, is something that can be considered. Claude Brown’s autobiographical novel *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) tells a coming-of-age story set in 1940s and 1950s Harlem in which the ‘promised land’ refers to how the previous generation of African-Americans had perceived New York as they migrated up from southern states. Though *Manchild in the Promised Land* might not appear to exhibit any classic criteria of flânerie and drift, it certainly succeeds in measuring the impact of place on people through other means. A significant portion of the second half of the novel is told via the narrator bumping into old friends and acquaintances in the street (without much emphasis on the walking in between) and them giving him news of friends from his youth, reminding him of the devastation caused on the community by drugs, violence, and poverty. The Harlem promised land exposes a gap between, on one hand, a generation with a rural upbringing clinging on to their old ways as their expectations for the promised land are shattered, and on the

other, a lost urban generation trying to find its place. The narrator is constantly being reminded to 'know his place' and to not aspire to too much, both by the older generation and his peers (many of whom believe that the younger generation's 'place' in the new setting should be resigned to drugs, violence, crime, and incarceration), but the narrator defies these structures and ventures out. As Coverley notes, for Blake's 'New Jerusalem' to be built, it is necessary the previous version be destroyed (Coverley 20). In this case, both 'place' and 'promised land' take on a meaning that is both allegorical and geographical. For the narrator in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, these familiar surroundings are experienced differently simply by leaving and coming back, the passing of time providing him with more and more insight and perspective on his surroundings.

If we examine the African-American traditions in music, art, and literature of the second half of the 20th century, there is a case for a figure that shares characteristics with the distant European cousin. Certain things are impossible to ignore: there was without a doubt a history of African-American art that happened in urban inner-city areas, which as spaces cut off from the rest of the city became crucial canvases in their own right. It is impossible to ignore the semiotics, the coded messages on the walls, and the fact that a lot of activities akin to flânerie and détournement happened in places that were of little access (to those who have so far written about such things, or, at least, having been recognized for writing about such things) before television and film allowed it (at least for anyone who did not grow up in a predominantly black urban inner-city area).

Using Rilke's words, de Certeau compares New York graffiti to moving 'trees of gestures': 'fleeting images, [...] calligraphies that howl without raising their voices and emblazon themselves on the subterranean passages of the city,' and 'dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains' (de Certeau 102). By emphasizing on the fleetingness of his experience with graffiti (either seen from a train or on passing trains), however, de Certeau

only describes part of the space that graffiti was beginning to occupy in New York by the 1980s, as these images, in some neighbourhoods, were not fleeting but already sitting perfectly still.

Noticeably, many of the accounts of psychogeography and flânerie make very little mention, if any, of something like urban graffiti art. As a practice that is at the same time challenging the imposed order while essentially marking someone's (an individual's but also, in the larger sense, a community's) presence, it is often used to subvert an opposing message yet remains emblematic of urban decay. This is not to say that simply walking around with a can of spray paint makes one a psychogeographer or even a flâneur; it is, however, probable that such urban areas had their own traditions, as well as their own witnesses who challenged the hostility of the environment, recording (maybe even in the strict audio sense, the way rap music does) observations in a way that could provide insight on the relationship between that environment and its inhabitants. Hip-hop culture in itself combines several art forms which include, amongst others, rap music and graffiti art, both of which are intertwined with black urban inner-city culture, but of course graffiti art is not something that is inherent to Black America. Regardless of where one happens to be in the world, information can be inferred about a neighbourhood from the type of graffiti on the walls around—or the lack of it—if one actually pays attention. Graffiti did, however, take on a pivotal meaning in the American urban inner-city, particularly in 1970s New York. In *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, J.T. Serra writes that '[g]raffiti is an outcome of psychological, intellectual, social, and political needs of a subculture, [...] a symbol of dissent by a minority faced with multiple forms of First Amendment repression' (Serra 312). If the flâneur had to choose between fighting the hostile intrusion and retreating to his home, another viable option was to adapt and regroup—like an organism—or seek refuge in the alleyways, where another portrait of urban life was painted, one whose impact may so far have been considerably underestimated.

Much can also be said about the graffiti and street art tradition's ability to co-opt advertising campaigns or reclaim green space: graffiti art is at its core a form of interventionist art and often found at the epicentre of a city's subtext, there to be deciphered. On this subject, Anne Pasternak writes:

Interventionist art, a term coined by the influential writer and curator Nato Thompson, describes the work of artists who trespass into the everyday world to critique, lampoon, disrupt, and agitate in order to create social awareness and even advocate for social change. In the process, they activate our urban spaces as places for democracy, keep our cities alive with creativity and powerful ideas, and engage new audiences (Pasternak 306).

In *Presence*, Jay can be described as an interventionist artist trying to find his place. With most of his endeavours, one can usually tell there is a double meaning or ulterior motive at hand. In the end, he not only produces an impressive visual for aesthetic purposes but also, by doing so, highlights the corruption in the city that made his project possible in the first place. Jay's arc and the narrator's arc follow two very different trajectories but are in essence two reactions to the same problems with the city: whereas the narrator 'becomes' the city, Jay repeatedly tries to make the city his canvas as he attempts to incorporate it as an interactive art installation in his experiments.

The Infrastructure of *Presence*

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau compares the inhabitants of New York high rises to voyeurs and posits that the 'elementary form of this experience of the city' belongs to 'the ordinary practitioners': the 'bodies [that] follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" without being able to read it' (de Certeau 92, 93). Similarly, the insight gained on a city by walking it cannot be compared with what we may think we have gained from seeing it on, for example, television, or, as mentioned

earlier, by using faster modes of transportation such as cars, buses, and subways: walking a city offers these images at their most uncorrupted.

For de Certeau, ‘the act of walking the city is to the urban system what the speech act is to language,’ ‘a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian,’ ‘a spatial acting-out of the place’ (de Certeau 97, 98). It is, therefore, not surprising that changes in infrastructure have such a profound impact on the city and its inhabitants. We can simply turn to, for example, something like the evolution of traditional urban places of congregation, such as public squares, which inhabitants would use as a place to meet and exchange ideas and which played pivotal roles throughout history, where what sometimes started as chatter in the square led to revolutions and governments being toppled. The public square no longer occupies the same significance but other places within the city (such as parks, bars, stoops and street corners) and even the virtual world have taken its stead.

Of course the present-day narrator in *Presence* hardly walks at all. Instead, he sits in a hotel bar waiting for his friend to arrive, but as de Certeau says: ‘What does travel ultimately produce if it is not, by a sort of reversal, “an exploration of the deserted places of my memory,” the return to nearby exoticism by way of a detour through distant places, and the “discovery” of relics and legends?’ (de Certeau 107; Lévi-Strauss 434-436). This is not to say that *Presence* is meant as a trip down memory lane. The juxtaposition of time—someone telling their life story within a present-day narrative frame that stretches over only the few hours it takes to drink a bottle of wine (the hourglass), where (in some ways) nothing happens (twice or maybe even three times)—is used to highlight certain themes, such as the love/hate relationship the narrator has with the city and the struggle he faces when returning to it even for a brief period of time; or the observations made possible after some time away; or the fleetingness of time and absurdity of life in general. The narrative frame itself, other than being a nod to the plight of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s

Waiting for Godot, is what roots *Presence* in the present and supports the notion that where it is often most difficult to be present is, in fact, the present—and that nostalgia often results in wishing we had been more present in our past. Of course, the title plays off other possible meanings of the word: firstly, a term used in audio recording; and secondly, an apparition. Traditionally speaking, the role of the music producer is faceless and behind the scenes, yet a music producer's contributions are not only significant but often recognizable. The present-day narrator in *Presence* is no longer faceless, however, and no longer is he seen as merely a fleeting *presence*, arguably because the culmination of his resistance to industry conventions ultimately made him more memorable in the public eye—more *present*—albeit at a cost.

The concepts and concerns discussed in this essay are irrefutably part of the novel's foundation: from the growing pressures of technology, the personification of the city in the narrator, his being 'symbolic of a bygone age' (Coverley 74); to Jay's arc following a Debord-like path, moving from aesthetic endeavours to focus on ideas of political radicalism (although in Jay's case, the political would in the end be used as a means to fund his art) and his use of subversion and detournement throughout as a means to achieve this; to the crossroads of time and space, location and memory intersecting in horizontal and vertical planes; and of course, a lot of walking (in the novel but also as part of the research).

If the urban wanderer is still seeking to reclaim space, it certainly depends on the space itself, for the reclaiming may have taken an altogether new definition in present-day Hackney than the one it had for Sinclair, or the one it does in a gentrified Harlem today when compared with the one Claude 'Sonny' Brown terrorized as a child. Whether Livingstone and Gyarkye are correct in concluding that *flânerie* is 'not the right architectural frame on which to build a politics of what it means to walk around cities these days' can be argued, but it would be wrong to generalize what a city

is today and pretend all cities are equal and at the same stage of development. The same can be said about its inhabitants.

Within those adaptations inside the organism, the figures who walk the city's streets and record their observations are at the same time hybrids at different stages of their evolution and, on some level, descendants of a figure sometimes said 'never to have existed in the first place,' its lineages as murky as the entire subject at hand (Solnit 200). More than anything, the research for this essay, as well as the drifts that went into the research, highlight areas where one should tread with caution if to avoid certain traps and pitfalls. If one does, however, attempt the practice of psychogeographical drift or *flânerie* and wishes to remain scientific about it, it is also perfectly acceptable to simply note that the results were different from the ones expected and to jot down the observations. I did not include in this essay any accounts of my own drifts because I felt those observations would be of much better use left in the fiction, or even a separate work of non-fiction. Whether I was actually practicing psychogeography, *flânerie*, or simply just walking is not what is most important (although I would suggest that these tactics of reconnaissance when researching fiction are an altogether different thing), but one of the thoughts that dominated my mind throughout is just how easy it is for any of this to slip into self-importance and how careful an author has to be to avoid that. If anything, these walks served a purpose of separation between images that were corrupted vs. the ones really there. It also reinforced an idea in my head: that the only real constant in a city is the fact there are people there.

Presence

one.

It was never meant to be anything more than a day trip. Your in and out sort of thing. Go sign the deed, catch a flight home. Maybe even make it back in time for a quiet nightcap at Woody's. Maybe my wife would join me, too, if she was still awake.

Nobody even knew I was in town—I'd gone out of my way to make sure of that. I didn't want to get sidetracked and sucked into visiting some old haunt—it'd easily turn into *all* the old haunts—till the next thing I knew I was in some scuzzy afterhour bar that reeked of stale beer and piss, watching the sun as it came up over Park Avenue.

Somehow Jay found out I was here, though—somehow he always found out these things. He called me up collect from a payphone, not even for a moment sounding sore about the secrecy of my trip, instead just getting straight to it, insisting we find time to meet for a beer or two, saying he had something *big* to tell me, preferably show me, and that it had to be done in person. I felt sorry for my attempt to slip the visit past Jay of all people—albeit even worse for being caught—so I said sure, why not.

After signing all the papers that needed to be signed, I started making my way down St. Laurent to the Old Montreal bar we'd fixed as a meeting point. When Jay had asked me to pick a place, I'd only insisted it be somewhere far away from Mile End, convincing myself that if we were to at least dilute ourselves in the masses, maybe people wouldn't recognize me as much. Of course, I'd get recognized in most places. Not just in Mile End. Not just in Montreal. A drunken rant in front of twenty-five million people will do that to you.

So Jay chose this bar he said was on the ground floor of a hotel and it's starting to get dark out now as I reach the steps of the front entrance. I'm here way too early—forty minutes before the time we'd set, which in itself was an approximation—and given that Jay is never on time for anything, not even for meetings he himself arranges, I know I have a fair amount of time to kill.

I sit down at a table with a view of the St. Laurent foot traffic and while I wait to get served I watch the sheet of snow as it settles over icy patches on the sidewalk. Some passers-by, most likely tourists from warmer places, slip and resort to elaborate arm rotations to keep their balance, but even that doesn't save one of them from locking lips with the curb.

A waitress comes by and greets me in French before handing me a menu. I point to a bottle of French pinot and when she asks me how many glasses I'd like, I put up one finger. Jay hated wine—always blamed the tannins and sulfites for the mammoth hangovers he'd suffer from the next day whenever he'd have so much as a sip—and would likely be enquiring about the craft IPAs before his ass even made contact with the chair. Besides, knowing Jay, there's always a chance he won't even show at all. This bottle of red will be my hourglass, I figure. Five glasses and I'm out of here. If he isn't around by the time it's done, I can still cab it to Trudeau in time for the last flight back.

I know this place hasn't always been a hotel—of that much I'm sure. But as I try to recall what had been here before that, my memory falters. I remember there being a storefront on the Notre-Dame side; I can even picture the cursive font of the writing on the window but for the life of me I can't remember what any of the words had said. Had it been a deli? Maybe a music store? Part of the old printing press? I really can't recall. The memory lapse itself is unnerving—I haven't even been gone that long. And even though I know for sure I've never walked into it since it became a hotel, there's still something familiar about the place. About the way it smells, mostly—but maybe that's just every hotel bar everywhere, something there always reeking of adultery or what not, in the upholstery and in the air.

The waitress brings the bottle over and pours me a taste before filling up the glass. As I thank her for it, it hits me that I've barely uttered a word of French since I'd moved, and in the moment I feel bad about it.

I'm not gonna lie—there's something fucked up about being here. It's not like that much has happened to me since I've left—except maybe the one or two obvious things. It's Montreal that looks different. Like a lot has changed in my absence. Isabel and I rarely used to visit places this far down the Main together, but even here, as people walk by in the street, it's like I see in them versions of people they've replaced. People from way back.

A few sips of wine have already warmed me up despite the scenes on the other side of the glass. Jay doesn't own a cell phone—he's resisted them for most of his adult life—and there's no way I can check on his whereabouts, so I take off my coat as I gaze out the window at the streetlamps radiating off the ground, as they turn the snow an amber colour like they often do. I stare at this imaginary boundary, the Main often portrayed as this divide between English and French halves of the city, as if separating more than just the city's street addresses west from east. I'd never seen it that way, though. Tourists aside, most of the city flocks to some stretch of the strip on a Saturday night. If anything, I always thought the Main had more tribal boundaries north-south than it ever did east-west, the hipsters up in Mile End worlds away from the dealers and twenty-five-cent peep shows of St. Catherine Street, but even then, sometimes it was as though those zones all bled into one.

This is by no means the type of place you'd normally expect to see Jay—then again, it's not like Jay is actually here. Above the island bar a chandelier made of crystal glass candles hangs off a coffered ceiling. I'd once wanted to get a chandelier just like that, albeit a far smaller one, for the dining room in the house we had, and Isabel thought it too over-the-top, too *swashbuckling*, and said that if I wanted such a thing hanging off our dining room ceiling, I'd better use it to swing my way in to dinner every night.

My phone buzzes and I see I've received messages, but just as I punch in the password to unlock it, the brand logo appears and the screen then fades to black. I pull the charger out of my

coat pocket but, spotting no outlet nearby, I leave the charger on the table, figuring I'll ask the waitress to plug it in behind the bar for me next time she comes over, just in case it's Jay leaving a voicemail to cancel or something.

The wine is heady and fragrant and glazing my view of the street. I turn the bottle to the label, where a despondent-looking cherub sits wings deployed and his chin in his palms surrounded by cursive lettering that twines like vines, his eyes upturned like a lovesick teen picking rose petals in a field. I wonder what the cherub's got to feel so down about, and in the moment I'm already starting to drift and making up stories in my head, but the icy street snaps me right back out of that daydream. It's just as well, I figure. Sometimes it's as if, perhaps as a result of a moment of distraction, or perhaps fuelled by a bit of alcohol, or the right tune or lighting, or just from having too much time to kill, a thought can open a door, that'll in turn only reveal more doors, till pretty soon it had you standing there stuck in hallways turning all the doorknobs, with nothing to pull you out of there. You really have to be careful with that kind of shit.

*

When I first met Isabel in that bar on the east side of St. Laurent Boulevard, she told me she'd only be in town for another month. I had just come home from another twelve weeks of living like a glorified bum, touring the country in a camper van singing songs on a stage, and I wasn't sure I'd ever want to do it again.

She was in her last year of Art History at NYU, at Concordia on an exchange till Christmas. Sitting on a high stool she sipped from a wine glass she held by the stem like a fountain pen, wearing all the colours of the houselights on her pleat-shoulder dress, with the neckline sloped, and her hair up in a chignon wafting sharp floral scents as she leaned in, close enough to be heard over the music, and close enough for me to pick up on traces of the New York accent when she said she loved cats but didn't care much for *damgs*.

The year's first snow was falling as she and I stepped out front together for a cigarette, her in her leather coat standing contorted against the building's faded red brick, cigarette dangling off her lip, and her eyes focusing past me as snowflakes glowed in rings of amber streetlight, eddying in their descent and melting before they'd even hit the curb.

"Be careful," I said as I approached her with my lighter. "I once set a girl's hair on fire doing this."

"Do that to me and I'll kill you," she said.

It was nearly closing time and I mentioned a loft I knew in Mile End that served afterhours and asked her if she wanted to go.

"Not a chance," she answered. "I've done enough of that stuff in my life."

"What stuff?"

“You know, searching for life’s secrets in dark smoky places. It never works out. All that happens is I end up in awful breakfast joints at ten in the morning, drinking Campari and getting dirty looks from patrons eating crepes. It ain’t worth it.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but the sunrise is pretty at least.”

“Yeah, when you’re not the one lying in a ditch,” she said. “Come on. I have some wine at mine. Let’s get out of here.”

We walked the Main up to Mount-Royal, and then to her place on Coloniale, where we sat in the den smoking her roommate’s weed and drinking cheap Spanish grocery-store wine. She played a vinyl her father had given her—Leonard’s *Songs of Love and Hate*—on an old record player, also a gift from him. Later, she led me to her room, where once past the jamb she struck a match and brought it against the wick of a tealight. In its halo hung a painting of a city in ruins where out of the rubble grew a rose. Sitting cross-legged on her bed with our knees touching and her cheeks sunburst by the flame, she asked about the winter up ahead and I told her what it was like. Months where green disappears from your colour spectrum entirely. Where if you live on the Plateau the cold creeps in every night no matter how high you’ve turned the heating. Where despite the -40 windchills you tell yourself you won’t be bullied by the weather, but still wonder why the founders of this nation didn’t keep moving south, and whether this was in fact where the overly polite Canadian stereotype came from, folks dividing up the land they’d claimed and Canadians insisting on taking the block of ice to the north, when they could’ve picked California or the Florida Keys.

When the tealight gave out I was lying on my side, propped up on an elbow, tucking rogue strands of Isabel’s hair behind her ear, her top leg feeling warm entwined with mine. She sat up and, shielding her eyes from the dawn light coming through the gap below the curtains, she lit a joint. Behind her, two photos of her brother and her sat on her dresser: one with their mom, one with

their dad. When I asked her about her parents, she said her mom still lived in New York but she had no idea where her dad was.

“Do you ever miss him?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said reaching over to ash the joint into a water cup by her side of the bed. After a long pause, her facial expression as if settling on a feeling, “We’ve had a complicated relationship,” she said. “I have some nice memories of him. That’s the way I like to remember it...

“There was this time when I was about eight or nine,” she continued between drags. “I was off school for the summer. And he took the day off work to take me to Central Park. I had started ballroom dancing lessons and he’d always joke about me becoming the tallest ballerina in the Tri-state area. I was really into it, though, especially the waltzing.”

“You waltzed when you were eight?”

“I did,” she said. “At least—I tried to. We danced in the park that day. Me with my feet stepping on his brown suede moccasins. My dad could not dance for his life. He had no coordination whatsoever. I’d be laughing and going, ‘No, no, Dad, you’re doing it all wrong,’ and then he would just pick me up and lift me above his head and start spinning me like I was a helicopter propeller.”

“Would you scream?”

“Yes,” she said. “Playful screams.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then we got Polish sausages and ate them by the pond,” she said. “But in the end he cared more about travelling all over the country and philandering in fancy hotels than he ever did about that kind of stuff.”

The sun was already coming down when we woke up later that day. Isabel mentioned it being the first day of December, three weeks to the day till she’d go back to New York, and I

realized that an envelope full of cash I'd taken out the previous day to pay rent was still there in my coat pocket. As I started to get dressed, Isabel asked why I was in such a rush, and I explained about our landlord always giving Jay and me an earful about our being late on rent—and yet here it was, late again.

She pulled the blanket off of her, and as she stood up and started to walk out of the room, I followed her out and into the kitchen.

“You feel like coming for a walk?” I asked.

After hitting the switch on the coffee pot, she sauntered over to the living room window, drawing the curtains an inch for a look outside.

“I don't know,” she said. “It looks kind of fierce out there if you ask me.”

I shook my head as I laced my boot. “All that talk about the elements,” I said. “And you're just not cut up for harsh conditions.”

“There's a difference between not being cut up for it and avoiding it when you can—it's called not being stupid.”

“Suit yourself,” I said.

As I laced up the other boot, she drew a cigarette from the pack of Camels on the counter and lit it. Tilting her head and squinting, she kept her eyes on me, as if trying to keep a straight face yet giving away a grin on the corner of her lip. Rolling her eyes, she sighed out a billow of smoke.

“Let me at least have my coffee, will you?” she said. “Before we venture out on this arctic expedition of yours.”

Cars were trying to park, diagonally wedging into snowbanks by the side of the road, as she and I trundled up the Main. After dropping off the envelope at my landlord's on the ground floor of our building, we went up the stairs to the apartment I shared with Jay, who was there watching CNN under a cloud of hash smoke when we walked in. I introduced Jay to Isabel and opened a

bottle of whiskey as she and I sat down on the other couch. We listened to Jay rant about God and science, trickle-down politics and Park Avenue Chinese take-out, and elaborating theories on things like why you never saw Jews going around trying to convert people, like the white gentiles did—mainly with Jews or gays and what not. Because, let's face it, he'd said, Jesus was the only Jew he'd ever heard of who'd had any success converting anyone, and it wasn't even to the right goddamn religion, and so it wasn't really any wonder the Jews pretty much gave up playing the conversion game after that.

After Jay passed out on the couch, Isabel and I took some beers to my room. Outside the snow was falling again, peaceful now without the traffic. We sat on my bed in the glow of the Park Avenue streetlamps and she told me about how much she loved New York during the holidays, especially ice skating in Bryant Park, even though she'd fall down and bruise a whole hell of a lot; about how she hadn't seen her mother since summer and how they'd go for afternoon tea at the Plaza.

"I'll come back and visit when I have time off school," she said. "You oughta come visit, too."

*

So Isabelle went home and the holiday season passed and the winter was cruel in the way our winters were before we started fucking with the climate. And though I'd promised Isabel I'd go see her in New York, it would take a while for me to keep my word. I'd started working on an album with some friends who'd just been signed to a local label called Stargaze.

Isabel would sometimes call, never text; most of all she'd write these long letters and send them by mail: there'd be a *Love, Isabel* at the end, followed by a P.S., a P.S.S., and sometimes a P.S.S.S.. I'd respond to the letters the same day I'd get them, doing my best not to sound terse in comparison.

Once the record was done, I took the train to New York. I hated flying back then and would only do it when there was no other choice. As the train was leaving Poughkeepsie, I noticed that the woman sitting across the aisle had forgotten her scarf on the train. When I was a kid, seeing a stray item of clothing on the street or bus or metro—most of all when they were meant to be in pairs, such as mittens, gloves, or socks—would often lead to me picking them up and storing them in a box in my cupboard, to the dismay of my mother, who would wash them first, reluctantly acting as an accomplice in my hoarding habits. I stood up and stuffed the scarf in my coat pocket.

Isabel was waiting for me by the gates when the train pulled up at Grand Central. Her brown hair radiating, she looked ebullient and beautiful in the sunlight as we shared a cigarette on the front steps of a nearby building before taking the subway to Brooklyn, where once outside the station she shivered as we walked along Malcolm X. I took the scarf out of my pocket and tied it around her neck.

“What’s this?” she laughed. “Do you always carry ladies’ scarves on you?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I found it on the train.”

“Nasty,” she said untying the scarf, lobbing it back at me. “Why would you wrap me in some stranger’s scarf?”

“It’s not a stranger’s scarf,” I said. “Ever hear of finders keepers? It’s mine now.”

“Ever hear of a fuckin’ washing machine?” she added with a cackle.

Over the next few months she and I both made regular trips up and down I-87 to see each other; by the end of that summer Isabel graduated from NYU and moved in with me into a small one-bedroom apartment in Mile End soon after. Her previous stint in Montreal had given her enough French to order an *allongé avec juste un peu de lait* if she’d ever have to, but not too much more beyond that. She’d now found a job at the reception desk of an art gallery on Sherbrooke Street, and though it was one where you could get by with minimal French, she did her best to learn—so we’d rent old French films on DVD and play them with the subtitles on, and late one night we sat in bed watching Truffault’s *Les 400 Coups*.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, drawing on a cigarette as the final credits rolled.

“Sure,” I said.

“Do you ever worry about death?”

“You mean, consciously?”

“Yes, consciously.”

“No,” I answered.

“Not at all?”

“Rarely,” I said. “The only thing that truly bugs me about death is its permanence. Otherwise I’m pretty cool with it. It probably gives some meaning to all this crap.”

“Crap?” she said jabbing me in the rib. “What’s that line you keep quoting?” she then said.

“The Leonard Cohen one on death.”

“He says he’s not afraid of death itself, just the preliminaries.”

“Yes, that’s the one. The preliminaries.” I slipped my head under her arm to steal a haul off the cigarette dangling in her other hand. “So what do you think happens to him?” she asked.

“Leonard?”

“No, not Leonard,” she said. Pointing at the television, “The guy in the film. Antoine.”

“He dies, I guess.”

“What!? That can’t be right. You saying he just walks into the sea and drowns?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess so. He’s a fictional character, after all.”

“Obviously.”

“It’s not like he’s meant to survive past the credits.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That fictional characters don’t outlive the last page. That we often wonder what happens to them, but we shouldn’t. They’re not real people like you and me.”

“So to you, the credits roll and everybody croaks?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said. “Unless maybe there’s a sequel or something.”

“But there is a sequel!” Isabel said moments later, lifting up her phone for me to see, browser open to an IMDB page. “Baaaay-zaaay voll-ay,” she said. “See? So you lied. He doesn’t die.”

“Well, then he probably dies at the end of that one,” I replied.

“You’re impossible.”

At about the same time of night of our wrangling over Antoine’s fate, Isabel's father, a few miles out of exit 117 on the Garden State Parkway, was being hurled over a ramp after avoiding a swerving truck and losing control of his bike. The phone rang early that morning and Isabel left the room to answer it, coming back in with the white around her irises a reddened hue.

“What’s going on?” I sat up.

“My father,” she replied. “He was in a motorcycle crash. He’s dead.”

I pulled her into my arms, resting my chin on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” I said.

She let herself collapse onto the bed, pulling me down with her. I held her to me as she sobbed into my chest, the curtains drawn and the sun out and the sky enormous and blue, as she lifted her head up, exposing her mourning eyes to me before wiping the tears off with her hand. She tried smiling for a moment, before starting to cry again.

By the end of our first year together I’d be standing in between Isabel’s brother and her as their father was lowered into the ground, the dank grey New York autumn as backdrop, with Isabel turning to me, her sombre and stone-faced expression somehow warm and comforting—like half-light that needed darkness to be seen. Reaching out I took her cold hand into mine and squeezed it by the fingertips. Out of the rubble and joined at the stem, we stood there, sounds of prayers being spoken, and looked at each other for a brief moment before turning our heads back towards the priest, hand in hand, bound by sorrows we’d never be able to heal, our shoes sinking in the muddy ground.

*

As Isabel and I sat tucked in the nook of a crowded Fairmount Avenue café, she turned to me, wincing as she proffered her cup, asking whether it was just her or her latté had a sour taste to it. I took a sip, assuring her it was fine as I handed the cup back to her, but seconds later, after taking another sip, she was parting the crowd standing in her way in a run for the bathroom.

“Must be a bug,” she said as we headed back home. But the next morning the same thing happened on the front porch as we were leaving the house for the Y. “Maybe I’m pregnant,” she said. “I’m just joking obviously—my throat feels like I gargled a fuckin’ porcupine.”

When the doctor at the clinic read a 38.2 temperature she palpated Isabel’s neck and armpits looking for swollen glands and asked the nurse for a culture swab and a blood sample, one or both of which came back positive for strep throat. She gave Isabel antibiotics and told her to take Tylenol every six hours for the fever and pain, promising she’d feel better in a few days—which she did—long enough for us to forget we’d ever joked about her being pregnant—and it wasn’t until after she’d puked in my lap on a packed downtown-bound green-line train one morning that we’d even entertained the idea that having strep throat didn’t necessarily rule out pregnancy.

She was already about eight weeks in when we found out about it, which we realized meant she’d been pregnant since before her father’s funeral—since before he had died, even. Raising a kid broke and cramped in the squalid apartment I had was not something we’d even stopped long enough to consider seriously, which was fine with me: the idea had always terrified me, anyway. Probably for the same reason I hated flying or picked up strangers’ scarves and hoarded them, or why a ringing telephone would leave me petrified whenever I was left home alone as a kid. Or why I never dared to make facetious cracks about death anymore after what had happened with her dad.

In the clinic waiting room Isabel was lowered into her chair staring straight ahead, pale and blank-faced and breathing heavier than usual, her voice devoid of its timbre as I asked her whether she felt like she was going to puke. The air vent whirred and rattled and—as if one’s mettle wasn’t being tested enough—the room reeked a sickly sweet combo of stale potpourri and hospital smell.

“Even I feel like puking,” I said to her.

The girl sitting at the end of the row couldn’t have been more than sixteen. She was there on her own, her hands stacked primly one on top another on the drawstring bag sitting on her lap, her blonde hair up in a ponytail as a loose strand dangled over a florid and puffed up cheek. The wall behind her was a hideous lime green. Isabel’s breathing returned to normal when she noticed the girl. She shuffled down, three seats over, leaving one between her and the girl, and asked her how she was doing. The girl didn’t respond. Isabel repeated the question in French and the girl contorted her face as if she was going to say something but no words came out. There was no one else in the room; even the reception desk was left unattended. With an arm on the girl’s back Isabel looked up as if to see if there was a nurse nearby or someone who could look after her, then seeing there wasn’t, she looked at me, indicating the front door with a deft nod of the head.

I went outside and stood by the entrance in the light permeating a maple tree’s bare autumnal crown, lighting a cigarette and watching the A.M. time-lapse on Laurier Street, smoking the cigarette down to the filter before tossing it down a sewer, and when I came back inside the girl was gone and Isabel was in the same spot, sunk further down, her purse and jacket still a few seats removed.

“Everything alright?” I asked, taking a seat next to her.

“Yeah,” she said. “Girl just needed a pep talk, is all.”

“Are *you* OK?” I said.

She turned her head towards me, pursing her lips and blinking slowly, as if unmoved, allowing herself a little nod of the head but her eyes avoiding mine just as she did that. Then she turned her head back to face the front of the room, her forearms rigid as she fingered the crevices in my kneecap, in the end unable to let go even when they called her name.

*

Other than my parents, I didn't tell anyone about it at first. There wasn't anyone I was that eager to tell, really—other than Jay—but I hadn't even seen him since I'd moved out of the apartment, and I still felt bad for stiffing him with finding a new roommate on such short notice, even though he'd assured me it would be fine.

I was at Olimpico reading album reviews in one of the free weeklies when I could've sworn I'd heard Jay's voice coming from the street, urging someone to learn how to fuckin' drive. I looked outside and saw him on his bike arguing with a driver who had his window down. The driver, florid, hypertensive even to the naked eye, was shouting right back at him. I put my paper down and ran out, but by the time I got there Jay was already halfway down Waverly Street.

And so I kept walking towards his place and down the block ran into André 'De Facto' Rioux, owner of the record store on the corner, who was having a dart on the front porch of his shop. He invited me to come inside, where he had the *Bells of Passion's* debut EP playing through the overhead speakers. André also ran Mile End Jams, an independent label that mostly released obscure noise records exclusively on vinyl—*Bells of Passion*, whose debut EP had seen them blow up in the States thanks to a laudatory Pitchfork review, being somewhat of an odd fit with them.

André told me he'd been trying to reach me in the last couple of days. "I guess Jay never gave you the message?" he said.

I shook my head. "Haven't seen much of Jay lately."

"Do you know these boys?" he pointed up at the speakers. André had a lilting way of speaking even in his mother tongue, and as is the case with some francophones in Montreal, the inflections—neither consistent nor always in the right places—were even more pronounced when translated into English.

“Sure,” I said. “I know Mickey. Paul, too—I used to go by his DJ night at Korova almost every Tuesday. I even did sound for them once at Lambi a while back, too. I’ve heard the EP. It’s really good stuff.”

“I’m in way over my head,” he gestured with his hand, his lips making the sort of sound a silenced gun makes in films when it goes off. “It’s getting crazy,” he then continued. “I don’t know if you know this, but I produced the EP myself. In their rehearsal space. Now they’re getting all kinds of grants, from Factor and the Arts Council, and have written a full-length... All this to say, I thought maybe you’d be interested in producing their album?”

“Me?”

At that point I’d done only a couple of records, co-producing that is, both of them pretty small-time and certainly not anything that had received any international press. I did sound at shows around town and knew most of the local bands and most of them knew me, but no one considered me a producer yet.

“I thought you’d be a good match,” he said.

“We would do this where?” I asked “At their space again?”

He shook his head. “Banff.”

“Banff?”

“They have some hook-up there through the Arts Council,” André said with a shrug. “A studio up there in the mountains, in the outskirts of town. You know how Mickey is. Needs to be inspired and all that jazz. Analogue studio, though, you’ll be happy to hear.”

To many people I’d been an *analogue guy* before I even really started making records, all because of a preference I’d inherited for the format while interning at H2T years back—before all that *next-Seattle* stuff happened.

“Banff,” I repeated, mostly to myself. “For how long?”

“Four weeks of production—give or take.”

I told André I’d have to think about it and get back to him, on my way out mentioning something about going up to see if Jay was home, as I was already there and all.

“Oh, he’s home alright,” André laughed. “I saw him ride past here on his bike at a hundred miles per hour just before you walked by. He chained his bike on that lamppost over there—didn’t even bother to lock the thing. He went up shortly after. All day long I see these weirdos coming in and out of his building—and I’m pretty sure it has something to do with Jay.”

There was of course very little doubt that it had something to do with him.

Just before I’d moved out, Jay had given me a private screening of the short film he’d been working on—the one that ended up being shown at Sundance a few months after that. He had twiddled with his projector as he’d set it up for me in our living room at the time, explaining how it was set in Vancouver.

“Skid row,” he’d said. “Hastings and Main. In the ‘90s, man. It’s about this young punk chick from St. John’s, Newfoundland who hitchhikes out west looking for—well—life and love and cheap drugs and mild weather, and she falls in love with this squeegee kid, right? They start a band together and share a squat with junkies and bums. And that’s when it all goes to shit.”

“Naturally,” I had said, supine across the couch, head and feet on the armrests, puffing smoke at the cracks in the ceiling. “Sounds Cancon-heavy.”

“You bet,” he had said touching his nose. “*Mari usque fuckin’ mare.*”

The film opened with a group of punks pogoing in their squat blasting a fictitious band called *Blenheim Shuffle* on a boombox, their name revealed in a close-up shot of a wallposter in anarchic font, all while prepping and passing around hash joints. Most of the seventeen-minute short revolved around them going to see *Blenheim Shuffle* at a club in Gastown, as Hannah, a.k.a. Han Palindrome, a Newfoundlander with day-glo pink locks, and Axel, a tall stick-like squeegee with a

spiky green mohawk, make a pact to shoot heroin for the first time on the night of the show. They're seen thrashing near the stage with their friends during the opening act, and between sets they have a fight when Axel thinks Hannah's eyeing this boy in the pit and Axel disappears just as *Blenheim's* about to go on and then can't be found. At one point Hannah enters a long narrow bathroom as the lens shines the junkieproof ultraviolet that's meant to make your veins invisible and she splashes water on her face, the camera zooming in on her violet mug's reflection in the mirror as *Blenheim* chants trimetrical *here we gos* interspersed with furious distorted fifth chords in the background, and Hannah notices the music vibrating on the door of a bathroom stall left ajar, notices Axel's Docs in the gap at the bottom, and first she knocks and mouths the word *bello* and then his name, then when she's pushed it open the top of Axel's head's beaming at her like the northern lights tearing a hole in a purple night sky. His pants are down to his socks and his heart's over his knees, his belt buckle hanging loose round his thigh, syringe still sticking out of the meatiest part of it. By the time the medics jab him with naloxone and drag him outside his skin's already a spectral kind of ash colour. The final scene shows Hannah with her hoodie up and over half her face as she's skipping town on a Greyhound—to go back out east, presumably.

The film had been screened at Sundance, and from what Jay's sister told me when I had bumped into her, though it got some great reviews, Jay was bummed out, vowing not to make films ever again, not because he hadn't won the *best short* category, but because a film he'd described as *manipulative Sorkin-esque bullshit* had.

As I reached Jay's building, I let myself in by jimmying the old busted lock and then went up the stairs and through the unlocked door of the apartment, where a dude with muttonchops and a Magnum P.I. stache stood by the door in a bathrobe, talking on his cell phone in French. There must've been at least a dozen people in the apartment. Walking down the hallway I had to flatten myself against the wall to let a guy holding a boom-pole pass, and when I reached the end, a woman

with salon-fresh long and curly blonde hair sat on the couch in a baby blue dressing gown with her feet up on the opposite armrest. Jay was in my old bedroom giving what seemed to be a pep talk to a lanky guy with an afro and a nipple ring, while a disco ball hung from a light fixture right above them.

There were many times while I'd lived there when Jay and I had both struggled to make rent, and I'd often joked about him shooting a couple of skin flicks to get us out of the jam, and he'd always been adamant about it being the one line he'd never cross.

I called out Jay's name and he looked up and I asked him what the hell was going on, and he ran over and explained how he was trying to branch out; was trying a new genre; how it had been a long time since anyone had brought any innovation to said *genre*, repeating the word and somehow keeping a straight face throughout. He was going for this Lynchian-surrealist neo-noir mash-up, he explained. Vintage '70s aesthetic. Holding up his analogue 8-millimetre handheld Canon camcorder, he said something about me giving him the idea in the first place.

*

The neighbourhood was changing so fast. A lot of people from my day were leaving, it seemed, for areas deemed more family-friendly, like Outremont or the *Sud-Ouest*—or Toronto. When I met with Jay at Wilensky's a few days after I'd walked in on his shoot, he and I joked about this increasing ratio of unfamiliar faces to overall population we'd seen in Mile End in recent months, to which Jay pointed out the absurdity in sitting in a deli that hadn't changed in eighty years, that still had a cash register that dinged every time a bill was settled, crying into our fists about things around us changing too damn fast.

When I told him about the baby, Jay swivelled on his stool, lunging forward and wrapping his arms tight around me.

'Mazel tov, my man,' he said.

"Thanks."

"So I'm the godfather, I presume?"

I told him that, first of all, there wouldn't be a christening, and secondly, I reminded him that he was a Jew *and*, last but not least, now also a pornographer.

"Your point being?" he said wiping mustard off the corner of his lips.

I told him he got to be an honorary godfather for the time being, and that his first order of business would be to help me solve this *Bells of Passion* album dilemma that had kept me up those past few nights.

"What dilemma?" he said with a dismissive backhand swat.

"To Banff or not to Banff."

"Just do it," he said swallowing another bite of his sandwich. "Don't even think twice."

"And what about Isabel?"

“If she wants to come with you, she will,” he said. “If she doesn’t, she’ll be fine on her own for a few weeks. You can’t pass these things up.”

“But the girl practically just moved here,” I said. “And the first thing I do is knock her up and bounce for an entire month? That ain’t right, is it?”

“Listen, man,” he said. “You’re overthinking this. You need to stop that shit right now. You will both be fine.”

One of the harsher realizations one might come to, especially later in their 20s, would have to be how they’d been relegated to the role of a secondary character in the eyes of most of their friends—one who enters a scene greeted by canned laughter, who drops a few one-liners before exiting stage right and letting them get back to the main story. But a harsher realization often follows—realizing you’d been that secondary character all along and that there wasn’t anything to be relegated from in the first place. But it wasn’t like that between Jay and me. He and I had known each other for a long time, and though we’d go through long periods without seeing each other, when we would it’d be like we hadn’t missed a beat. If anything I could always be sure his advice would be sincere. I trusted his instinct more than I did my own.

“Pearls of wisdom,” I said. “Brought to you by the aspiring Tarkovski of Mile End’s 8-millimetre retro-erotica scene.”

“Tarkovski?” he winced. “Where’d you pull that one from? I mean, don’t get me wrong *Rublev* was good and all—great even—but come on, Svanmajer, or even Wenders, would’ve been a more fitting comparison for what I’m trying to do here.”

Outside the window, a kid was being led across the street by his dog, and when Jay noticed him, his face changed. As they passed in front of the deli, Jay kept his eyes on him, squinting, holding the expression till well after they’d gone.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

“That kid who walked by,” Jay said. “Ah, never mind.”

“No, come on,” I said. “I saw him go past. What about him?”

“He just... he looked a lot like Davey. That’s all.”

“Davey?” I said. “Who’s Davey?”

“You know,” he said. Bringing both his hands up to his face, he mimicked the follow-through of a basketball shot. “That Davey.”

I hadn’t thought about that kid in a long time, let alone remembered what he looked like. I’d met him the same day I met Jay, the first day of grade seven, in the school’s main hall as the principal stood on stage hammering home every cliché in the book during his induction speech, about us all being the cream of the fuckin’ crop, how we needed to start busting our asses yesterday. Davey, a short and stocky kid with a cowlick protruding from his ruffled brown hair, sat next to Jay, motionless and with his face the expression of a calf on a conveyor belt. Sensing his anxiety, Jay went over to him after the principal had wrapped up his indoctrinating for the day.

“If you love the school so much, why don’t you marry it, am I right?” Jay had said to him, and the kid turned to Jay, puzzled. “Never mind,” Jay said.

As all the kids walked out of the hall I saw Jay still prying the kid, trying to get him to open up, asking him about the kind of stuff he liked and what not, until the kid finally said something about basketball.

“You play basketball?” Jay had said. “Perfect! Let’s go shoot hoops during lunch break.” He then turned to me and asked me if I played. I nodded and said I’d come along.

The kid claimed he was really good at basketball, but when we passed him the ball, his very first shot went high, way over the backboard and over the fence, rolling down the hill all the way to Sherbrooke Street. Jay ran after it, managing to extract the ball from traffic and bring it back to the court. Hunched over and winded and his hands on his thighs he passed the ball back to Davey and

told him to have another go, which Davey again came nowhere near sinking but at least this time the backboard saved Jay from another half-mile run.

We played every day during lunch hour until the second week of November when we got hit with thirty centimetres of snow overnight, and then we never played again after that. All our term finals were in the main hall, and Davey, who'd been stressing out about the math exam for weeks, on the last day before the holidays didn't even show for it. And it wasn't until we came back after the break that we were told Davey had died, without them ever mentioning any details or anything, as if the whole thing was clouded in mystery as far as they were concerned. It was only by watching *CBC News at 6* that someone found out about Davey doing it to himself—with a scrip he'd found at home in a medicine cabinet—because he couldn't handle all that pressure to do well at school. Or so said the note at least. Can you imagine? Only twelve fuckin' years old.

Jay never forgave the school for how it handled that, for the way it seemed to show more concern about image and damage control than anything or anyone else—though he and I never really spoke about it at the time—but it was like Jay had a personal vendetta from then on, like he held the school responsible and wanted to make everyone's life miserable for the next five years. He'd often succeed, too. A natural hell-raiser. Though he came close to getting the boot several times, somehow he'd always stay one step ahead and manage to avoid it. This one time he got set up. These older boys came round asking Jay if he could score them some acid, and though Jay never did any drugs save maybe the occasional joint on a Saturday night back then, he knew people who could get you anything from PCP to Winstrol and was always ready to do you a favour as long as you asked nicely. He'd stuffed the Ziploc bag down his sock before gym the next day to avoid leaving it unattended in his locker and then got nervous about absorbing it through his skin during the mile run. When he got back to his locker his padlock was upside down, which was they did after a search—just to let you know they'd done one—as if the mess they left inside the locker itself

wasn't enough of a giveaway. But first thing Jay did after opening the locker was spot a hall monitor, and he flounced up to him in front of a large crowd of kids and told him that next time he searched his locker he should at least have the decency to put everything back in its right place. Jay was big on neatness back then. And later in the day one kid came up to Jay asking if what he'd said to the hall monitor was true, about how the next time the monitor would search the locker he'd find his own skull in it, to which Jay just shook his head and replied that that made no logical sense whatsoever. But it didn't matter. His rep was bigger than any kind of logic.

And on the last day of high school Jay pulled out two cans of warm and flat Molson Ex he'd kept in his backpack all day and raised his on the front steps swearing he'd never set foot in a classroom again, and I raised my can to that, too.

As Jay continued to stare out the window, the kid and dog now both long gone, the sky outside Wilensky's was clear and the dark Quebec-flag shade of blue that in Montreal is synonymous with the fuckin' cold. Jay then turned his head and sipped the last of his cherry cola before signalling the woman behind the counter for two more.

“So about that elephant,” I said. “I gotta ask. What inspired the career change?”

He looked up at me like he was disappointed I'd even ask.

“What career change?” he said.

*

If you've ever had the chance to see him perform live you'll know Bells of Passion lead singer Paul Tennant has that relaxed behind-the-beat delivery that makes each lyric ease into the next. The way he can drag a line without you ever losing confidence in his control of the melody is almost hypnotic. But back then, as soon as you'd tell Paul the tape was rolling it would be like the awareness of it being recorded would take over and strip that quality right out of his singing. He'd focus so hard on landing each note on the beat as precisely as possible that the take would end up sounding perfunctory and flat. I'd even noticed it before on their EP, to some extent, but nothing like when we started recording in Banff.

From the start Bells showed signs of a band unused to a recording studio, meaning the hardest part of my job was making them forget they were even in one. Take dynamics, for example. Something they knew how to work in their favour so well live, but in studio it was like this illusion of infinite tracks compelled them to layer overdub upon overdub, to a point where I had to step in and explain how we had twenty-four tracks, nine of which we'd used on the drums, and that there was no way I was going to start bouncing tracks to free up recording space for useless overdubbing.

"Twenty-four tracks," I said to them again and again. "It's all you need. If you're going over, you need to rethink your priorities."

But I wasn't getting the idea through, so I let them waste an entire day of recording, allowing them to lay down every overdub their overzealous hearts desired. And when I played them all together for them, the whole thing sounded like a musical equivalent of a traffic jam. Like the fuckin' Turcot at rush hour.

"How the hell are you even planning to add strings to this mess?" I asked. "Can't you see it's already so cluttered up from all the guitar tracks?"

So to make my point I started muting tracks one by one, till I'd muted six or seven of them and the ride cymbal finally had the space it needed to breathe and create that illusion of volume and fullness in the chorus and the song finally started to sound like something.

“See!?! This is what I’m talking about,” I said, pacing up and down the room. “You know how people keep telling you again and again that less is actually more?” All four members of the band nodded, their faces betraying some sort of concern, looking at me like I was a madman brandishing a scalpel in front of their infant. “Well,” I continued, pausing at the console and muting one of the room mics, “sometimes, lesser is even fuckin’ better.”

My apartment in Banff was on the western edge of town, just down a stretch of forest path from the studio. Isabel was at her mom’s in New York for those four weeks—six months pregnant at the time—and most nights I’d call her on my walk down after we were done, to say hello and ask her how her day had been. Jay had been right: as much as I’d worried about going to Banff, when I’d brought it up with Isabel for the first time, she’d been even more adamant than he that I should go.

On the ground floor of my building was an Irish bar, and it was there I first met Jenn Blake. Bells and I came by and shared a pitcher one night and Jenn was there singing to a crowd of no more than nine, just her and her guitar. Most bars in that part of the country seemed to all employ essentially the same singer, who’d perform stripped-down unplugged background renditions of top 40 hits and what not, but Jenn wasn’t that singer by any means. The nine-or-so pairs of eyes were transfixed on her, and with a simple yowl Jenn could demonstrate a wider affective range than most singers possessed in their entire toolkit, her delivery as if turning switches inside you on or off more or less at will, her presence under the stage’s Walmart-glow at once luminous and yet, just, sad.

Paul turned to me as the sparse applause for her last number faded. “I wasn’t expecting that,” he said. “Girl’s got one hell of a voice.”

We invited her to sit down with us after her set. She told us all about being from Victoria and taking a ferry to Vancouver and hitchhiking over from the coast, along the way playing any joint that would have her, sometimes as a resident for weeks at a time, but how those gigs were few and far between for someone who didn't play top 40 covers.

I'd often stop by for a nightcap and catch the last few songs of Jenn's set. The place never got any busier. After she'd finish playing, she'd come have a drink at the bar and ask me all kinds of questions about recording. I'd tell her how she didn't *need* a producer, or an engineer, or a studio, or a label. That many people were making cult records in their bedrooms with just a laptop and a decent microphone. That tape reel guys like me were on their way out anyway. That nobody got signed on labels these days.

"Great," she said. "I guess I'm fucked—I don't even own a laptop."

I asked her how many songs she had ready to record—say if an opportunity came up—and she said she had eighteen, but that she'd probably cut it down to eleven or twelve if she had to make an album.

"Tell you what," I said. "I leave exactly one week from now. If you want to meet me here after your set every night until then, and if you're willing to keep this between us, I'll take you to the studio and we'll make your record."

She gave a nervous smile. "I appreciate the offer," she said, "but I'm not sure I can accept that."

"Why not?"

"It's just that... I'd feel kinda bad."

"Feel bad for what?"

"Stealing everyone's studio time and all."

“It’s not like the band members are the ones paying for it—their label is,” I said. “And nobody is using those midnight hours anyway. Only person whose time you’d be stealing is me, and you can’t even call that stealing when I’m here offering it to you.” She looked at me as if trying to read me, her fingernails hitting the glass table in staggered taps, as if accentuating this passing of time where no one said a thing. “Listen, hun,” I broke the silence in a mock record-exec voice, pointing to a non-existent watch. “I ain’t got all day—I’m a busy guy here.”

After another pause, a soft grin appearing on her lips, “Fine,” she said. “I’ll think about it.”

And so for the next week we spent our nights making her record. Between Bells and her, I was pulling twenty-hour days, but thinking back I don’t remember ever feeling tired. The Bells record was down to its finishing touches anyway. And even when I did feel weary at the end of a long day, listening to Jenn was somehow as good as sleep. By morning I’d feel refreshed again. She’d do this thing where she’d light a candle and sing in the dark, sometimes the entire album in a single take, as if performing it for an audience. Then we would listen back to it and she’d say she’d like to make this change or that change to the sequencing and try it from the top again. And though these changes didn’t always seem necessary, I never tried to stop her. I would’ve been crazy to. Because each time her voice would shed an extra layer of restraint, as if just getting warmed up and now on a roll. The only thing that would stop her was the sunlight when it came, quartered by the muntins of the speckled eastern pane, drawing from her a feeble yawn as it sketched rosebuds in her hair. Only then would we call it a day.

Back in Montreal, the mid-April remnants of snow were melting underneath my boots as I trudged up Park Avenue from the airport shuttle terminal by the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. On Fairmount people walked around in t-shirts in the midday sun. Isabel’s plane wasn’t scheduled to land for another four hours, so I dropped my bag in our entrance and made my way up the block to

Olimpico and sat there, moving back and forth from the smoking patio to indoors, observing the faces walking in and out, greeting the ones I knew, telling them about Banff and how I'd just made it home.

Isabel was much bigger than she had been when I'd left for Banff when I met her taxi in front of our door. I retrieved the plush wolf I had for her from my bag, which I bought for her after she'd reminded me every night on the phone in Banff how I wasn't allowed to get eaten by one while she was pregnant. As she put her bag down on the sidewalk I squeezed the wolf between her ribs and forearm and she leaned in and gave me a kiss. She then handed me a see-through duty-free bag with a carton of Camels and a bottle of bourbon inside.

"Imagine the looks you get buying whiskey and cigarettes looking like this," she said pointing to her bump.

We walked through the door and as I took off my shoes and made it down the hallway I felt my socks getting wet, and when Isabel switched on the lights we saw that the entire floor was flooded, it looking like it had come from a leak one floor above. When I reached the landlord, she said all she could do was send someone in the morning, and so I called Jay's sister Amy, who worked at Hotel Opera in Old Montreal, and she told me she wasn't working that night but that she'd sort us out. So we took a cab to Old Montreal and at the hotel the receptionist handed me the key to a suite and said they were only charging us staff price, and upgrading us to a suite because, well, it was quiet and we were friends of Amy's.

Up on the 16th floor I poured some bourbon in one of the water glasses after running up the hall and down a floor and back to get Isabel an iced tea from the vending machines. She told me about the baby kicking and about how she'd resisted pink champagne at showers thrown by her high school friends. It wasn't even 9pm when she fell asleep. I covered her up and tucked a pillow under her head, then switched off the lights and opened the balcony door, stepping through before closing

it back up behind me and lighting a cigarette. The river was now flowing again all around the island and the only smoke you could see out of chimneys was coming out of the Molson Brewery to the left. The clapping sound of horse hooves on cobblestone travelled up sixteen floors to where I put my cigarette out on the balcony railing before stepping back inside and getting under the covers beside Isabel as quietly as I could, falling asleep in a hotel suite at 9pm, my apartment shin-deep in water, happier than I had been in a very long time.

*

Before I'd had the chance to witness it with friends—like most people from my generation, I suspect—most of the insight I'd had on newborns came from '90s sitcoms. The character arcs of fictional American TV moms and dads that had you believing you'd be at home having an argument with your partner, during which her water would break, forcing a panicked run to the hospital lugging pre-packed bags and using the first person plural to describe your going into labour, in the delivery room surrounded by all your friends and your partner adamant about having the baby naturally, until of course she seized you by the shirt collar, ordering you to get her some damn drugs if you knew what was good for you. And the week after that you'd be falling asleep at meetings, or something. In either case, sleep deprivation was the only constant to be expected.

But Sara was such a quiet child, our unaltered sleep patterns sometimes almost cause for concern. She'd never raise her voice, seldom cry. Isabel and I would just sit there and watch her sleeping in her crib with her mouth agape, the opening the size of a Cheerio, drool dribbling down onto the pillow, and us transfixed by what we'd made. She and I would even take her with us when I went to work. I'd never thought babies you could bring to a recording studio even existed, but she could sit there all day and you'd hardly notice she was even present.

I had finished mixing the Bells record at my friend Wa Lapli's studio in Parc Ex and had sent it off to their label. I had also finished Jenn's, which sounded better than anything I'd ever made on either side of the console. I even got in touch with Malware Records for her—then still only a small label in Brooklyn—and they ended up signing her. They planned her a record launch and a tour and she had seemed thrilled about it when I'd last spoken to her, promising she'd send us invites to the Montreal show. In the meantime I bought Isabel canvas and oil paints to encourage her to start

painting again, something she'd given up since moving to Montreal, doing what I could to allow her the time to do it.

The evening of Jenn's Montreal show, Isabel and I sat on a patio on the lee side of St. Laurent drinking cocktails and chain-smoking cigarettes for the first time in what felt like forever, while Iz's mom, in town from New York, kept an eye on Sara at home. Isabel sipped her Old-fashioned, looking graceful in a white-button up, her chestnut hair blowing in the breeze as rush hour traffic clustered up the Main.

"Great news about the reviews," she said pointing to the weekly on the next table, with Bells of Passion on the cover. "It's going to do so well."

The Bells reviews I'd read were great, but Jenn's, whose record had come out two weeks before that, were even better.

Throngs of people were filing in when we got to Sala Rosa, and by the time we'd ordered drinks Jenn was already walking on stage, two musicians trailing her, and as the drummer counted off the intro to the first song, we looked for a spot to stand. Her songs—even more so live—evoked the sort of black-and-white Mancunian gloom of exposed-brick rooms and slightly off-centre symmetry and dilapidated factory buildings, with melodies so sad they made you smile. A song she played in that sacrosanct $\frac{3}{4}$ beat just about turned ceiling into apse. Entranced, the crowd swayed. Isabel was holding my hand; she was swaying, too.

I'd often joked to Isabel about how if you grew up in Mile End, chances were your heart had long abandoned its steady $\frac{4}{4}$ beat in favour of a $\frac{3}{4}$ —or a $\frac{6}{8}$ —how it was the $\frac{4}{4}$ kids who were born with the disadvantage: lacking poetry, not knowing how to sway or what to do with the missing beat—but people like us never really knew what to do with the extra one when it was thrown at us. Our fate was dactylic, 'FOUR in the MORning, the ENd of deCEMber', encrusted in the city's backdrop by our most well-known bards. Rise on the upbeat, sit on two, hopeless on three.

Raaa-ta-ta and repeat. Never trusting those who seemed content with their everyday because they lived in either deceit or denial. Knowing that happiness meant spending two thirds of your time plucking rose petals in the dark. Knowing beauty needed hardship to bloom, so we'd slow down when it poured out, and we'd watch 4/4 folks scatter to the nearest bus stop for shelter. We'd come across as self-indulgent pricks, or damned poets, the back of our hands crazy-glued to our foreheads, waltzing through life, incapable of any forward momentum, pendulums with too much swing, never knowing when to stop. We knew we could only fall for another heart if it also beat in threes, and we understood science just enough to know our children's hearts will also inevitably beat a *raaa-ta-ta*, just as yours' will likely beat the steady one-two-three-four that will allow them to get by just as long as they don't ever stop to think. We'd never post about exact moments of conception because we felt joy's imminent downswing. We'd fight windmills and flirt with insanity for sport, the lucky ones making careers out of it. We would starve, we would binge, and we would purge; we were drawn to God and death, silence and nothingness, but it filled us with more worry than peace, sending our hearts racing in untamed signatures. We'd read the Old Testament and marvel at the immediacy with which God recognized the quality of his own work. Never an ounce of self-doubt or worry that critics would say his early stuff was O.K., but that his post-flood stuff was a 6/10 at best. We'd quote Leonard's 'not being afraid of death but being afraid of the preliminaries' and realize that those preliminaries had started for most of us. Can you blame someone for not wanting to spend decades wrestling angels? Jacob at least stood a chance.

We went backstage after the show, jostling our way through the stage crew and lingering journalists who stood there with their pens and notepads out, to see Jenn. We invited her to come out for a drink, but she said her bus would be leaving for Toronto at any moment.

“Shame,” Isabel said. “I was really looking forward to meeting you. Properly, I mean. Maybe next time.”

“Sure,” Jenn smiled. “Next time.”

Isabel and I walked back down the Main later that night, ending up in the same bar where she and I’d first met, her friend Eva still there pouring drinks and Jay sitting near the far end with Drumz, a local rapper Eva was seeing, and a kid called Skinny Zonk a few seats down.

“These boys have some funny names,” Isabelle whispered in my ear after I’d introduced them, as she and I walked towards a pair of empty seats at the bar. I told her how it had been Jay and me who’d given Zonk his nickname a while back—after he’d passed out at a party—taking four letters of his name and turning them into an anagram the best we could, adding in the *skinny* for good measure in case we’d ever have to differentiate him from another Mile Ender named Zonk.

“And what about Drumz?” she asked looking over at him. The local rapper-turned-unfortunate-viral-sensation after widespread mishearing of a lyric in the chorus of one his songs was bopping his head to Damian Marley, snarling at no one in particular between sips from a PBR tallboy. “How’d he get that name?”

“That one was all Jay,” I said. “Something to do with the MPC drum machine he bought when he’d dabbled in beatmaking. It took the guy about two weeks to figure out how to turn the thing on.”

“Huh,” she said. “It’s kind of funny—Jay seems to be behind every nickname around here, and yet his own name—it’s just one letter. Spelled out, I mean.”

Eva poured us all a last round of pints before switching the taps off for the night, and we drank them waiting for her to settle her cash. After we’d finished them, we walked down the stairs and outside, and just as Isabel and I started to walk away, Drumz whistled us down.

“You’re not really going home this early, are you?” Eva said.

As so often happens when you find yourself hanging past the 3am exodus in the streets of Montreal, no matter if it's a Monday or that the streets look deceptively quiet, you'll be made aware of some new place where anyone unwilling to go home can go hang in till sunup. Not just the hipster loft parties in Mile End, either. The Plateau was full of these afterhour places, mainly clandestine coke bars, many with fake palm trees and long plastic fronds and names made up to sound like places in the Caribbean. And every night there'd be someone there fresh off a shift at a St. Catherine Street rub n' tug, still smelling of Purell and talcum powder, and if you'd ask them about their work they'd roll their eyes and tell you how you just wouldn't believe how many chumps out there turn into Mother Theresa once they'd seen you wipe their spunk off your forearm, but how despite that it was as good a way as any to get through college. Every night there'd be a guy sitting on a stool with a large coffee from Tim's in his hand, yawning into his fist and complaining to you about the graveyard shift killing him, and you'd realize that there are people out there who set their alarm clocks for 2am, who hit the snooze button when it rings just like everyone else, but they then happen to spend the rest of their mornings dealing eightballs and molly. There'd be thrift-store fedoras and hand-me-down trench coats. There'd be a different bouncer every time, but the secret knock would always be the same. Something deceptively simple, like, *tap-tap* followed by *tap*. There'd be flat tepid beer that'll have been poured out into plastic cups since before closing time to stay on the good side of the law and avoid a raid, liquor licenses being the one area where cops actually seemed to give a fuck. There'd even be a few cops in there with you, along with an inordinate number of sunglasses for a low-lit room after dark but perhaps one or two exposed black eyes. And maybe there'd even be a strange sordid appeal to it if you were seeing all this for the first time, because the suffering wasn't obvious, hunched over a bar gaunt, tattered, and torn, like in the movies, shaking its head as if wondering what it'd done with its life.

Eva was sitting on a couch armrest her legs astride Drumz, who was sniffing coke off a key, at first digging it into a baggie and bringing his head down to the key rather than vice-versa. Isabel and I had smoked a joint with Zonk on the way over and he was now sitting with his head back on the couch next to Drumz, living up to his name. Isabel and I stood at the bar drinking flat Coors Light as Jay leaned on the jukebox, saying something in the ear of a woman who, judging by the sinuous and second-nature way she moved her hips to Roxette's *Listen to Your Heart*, and given the place and the time of night, we guessed was an off-duty pro. It took no more than ten minutes for Drumz to bust out of his shell and start doing rails right there off Eva's thigh, which the bouncer wasted no time spotting, trundling over to Drumz and pulling him off the couch by his neck before giving him the proverbial boot, with Eva clambering off the armrest in her heels and running past the door after Drumz, leaving poor ol' Zonk all alone in the middle of the three-seater.

Isabel and I both laughed.

"Should we go after them?" I said.

"Nah," she smiled. "Ain't no use mollycoddling a couple of drug-addled fools when they're in love." She looked over her shoulder towards the couch, the free seats now taken and Zonk the buffer in a conversation between a bandanaed woman with hoopie fortune-teller earrings and a ponytailed guy who I'd imagined having a hard time finding work as anything other than a debt collector. "What do we do with Zonk?"

"Jay will wake him up when he leaves," I said.

Walking the strip back up towards Mile End I realized we still had what was left of Zonk's weed, so I rolled a joint for us to smoke on the way. It was raining now but for some reason we just kept going. We were soaked but we laughed about where we'd ended up and wondered if we'd spend the remainder of the night in a motel. I slurred something about us going to Vegas and getting married and she laughed and said it was a little late for a shotgun wedding and that I should

try her again some other time. We then tottered into a park, cutting through it towards the fountain, passing a row of maple trees, when Isabel tugged my shirt sleeve, leading me off the path laying a hand flat on a tree, reaching behind and pulling me to her by my belt. I unzipped her skirt and she undid my belt and she turned her head to the side, cheek against the bark of the tree, and I felt her shirt cold and wet from the rain as I pressed up against her. Holding her hair in a ponytail I leaned in and kissed her neck. Sheltered under the crown we stayed wet and interlaced as the downpour lashed a prolonged shush against the trees, light zipping out of a crack and across the sky, and us counting, one-steamboat, two-steamboat, three-steamboat, before hearing a roar, and not even for a moment ever feeling unsafe.

*

When shoegaze legend and lead singer of Nör-Nör, Sven Bitgen, first called me from Reykjavik to talk about recording his band's next album, I took it as a given we'd be doing it on tape. We both did. But when Sven showed up in Montreal a few days ahead of the scheduled sessions—with his bandmates still back in Iceland—videoing in from his hotel in his bathrobe at four in the afternoon saying how we needed to talk, the gravity in his expression seemed to suggest that maybe something wasn't going quite according to plan.

Nör-Nör had just left the label they'd been with their whole career, Sven explained, to sign with Virgin—a major label. And Virgin now wanted the record to sound a certain way.

It didn't take too long for me to accept that this album was simply going to be cursed from the start, that I just had to make the most of it. In hindsight, it would've worked out far better had we just delayed it by a few months. But instead we went straight into it. Most of the bed tracks were done live off the floor, and after that, the five members of Nör-Nör never even found themselves in the studio at the same time again. Any issues that would come I'd just patch up—exactly what I'd warned Bells not to do—and then when that would create new issues, I'd patch those up, too. By the end of it, I'd tampered with the master so much that any semblance of five musicians ever being together in a room was gone.

The worst part of it was that, while Sven and I sat there in the control room mixing the album, we had somehow convinced ourselves we'd made something great. Sven would roll these cannons and as we'd smoke them we'd play a song on loop, belting along to the choruses, like we'd become die-hard fans of our own creation. People were always coming in and out of the studio, too, and they would just further contribute to our delusion, the mood on one occasion egging on Sven, who'd climbed up on the mixing board, highball glass filled to the brim with Bacardi in his hand,

stomping his boot down on the console as he howled along to the first single's intro as it blared through the monitors.

A few weeks after I'd shipped it to the label, I gave the record another listen and only then realized what we'd done. I was in New York when the reviews came out a few months later, and Isabel, noticing me checking her computer that morning, asked me what they were saying about it.

"They say it's shit," I told her. "Like, unanimously! I haven't found a single review that isn't absolutely scathing."

"Don't swear in front of Sara," she said. "You knew it was gonna suck, though. You said yourself that it was the most pretentious garbage you'd ever made."

"She's not even one, Iz. But yeah, I knew it sucked. It's Virgin's fault for insisting we do it their way. Tape sounds too dirty—Fuck Branson."

"I don't think it was his call, love," she said. "What's Pitchfork saying about it?"

"It's still way too early, and I'm still way too sober, to check Pitchfork."

That day I swore I'd never make another record unless it was done my way. It's not even that I thought analogue recordings superior to digital in terms of sound quality, but it was at least a process I understood. While I was an intern at H2T I'd get amazed by just how little tampering was involved when everyone involved knew what they were doing. For the most part you either had your take or you didn't. No copy pasting your best chorus so that each one sounds the same. No obsessing over human error and trying to fix it, shifting bum notes and moving late cymbals, until you ended up robbing the record of its personality.

I went back to producing local bands for next to no money. Isabel and I had planned a trip that spring, and I'd initially suggested Cuba or the Florida Keys expecting Isabel to counter with Loch Ness or some other place where it always rained, but she seemed happy with the Keys.

“Which one’s the one with all the cats?” she’d asked. “The Hemingway one? Key Largo? Key West?”

“Key West.”

“Let’s go there,” she’d said.

But I had to empty all the savings I had set aside towards opening my own studio so that we could go. We even ended up subletting our apartment to a friend for a few weeks and putting some of our stuff in storage to free up some space for him. It was the first time Isabel had shown me some of her paintings and I remember liking them very much.

The day before we were set to leave for the Keys, our bags were packed and the car was loaded and parked on the corner of Waverly Street when I got a call from an A&R at Island Records in New York asking me to meet with them over video conference. I told them I’d drop by instead, so that we could do it in person. It was on the way to Florida, anyway, I figured.

We beat the morning traffic out of Montreal and made it into New York with a few hours to kill before the meeting, parking the car in an underground garage off West 34th Street, strolling through Central Park, then sitting on a bench where we ate ham sandwiches. I then walked down Central Park West to where it becomes 8th Avenue, to the corner of West 50th Street to the Island offices. I told the security guard I was there to see Tom Sellers and she gave me a building pass and told me to take the elevator up to the 46th floor where I was shown to Tom’s office.

“Thanks for coming in,” Tom said. “On such short notice, too. I’m glad we get to do this face to face. The reason I wanted to see you is, as you may or may not have heard, we’re thinking of working with *Bells of Passion* on their next album.”

“Fantastic,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “And they would very much like to work with you again. They’re hell bent on it actually. Frankly we’d also like to see it happen.”

“Great.”

“But here’s the thing,” he continued after a short pause. “I know how you feel about analogue tape. You still do most of your work on tape if I’m not mistaken?”

“Mostly,” I said.

“Not exclusively?”

“Well, no,” I said, wondering if Tom even read record reviews.

“Look,” he said. “I can see the concern in your eyes. I know where you’re coming from and I feel you. I love that warm sound of a tape reel, too,” he said, cupping hand over fist and bringing it to his heart. “But we had a focus group on this the other day, and we thought that, to take them to the next level, commercially speaking, we really need to get that radio sound out of them.”

“I see,” I said. “That radio sound.”

“Would it be something you would be willing to consider?”

“I’m just wondering,” I said. “Why ask me? You must know a million producers, some of which are pros at getting that exact sound you want.”

“Like I said, you’re their first choice. You’re ours, too.”

“Who’s your fallback, if I’m allowed to ask?”

Tom tightened. “Jennings.”

“Steve Jennings?”

Tom nodded.

“Steve Jennings and the Bells of Passion would be a disaster.”

“It’s a distant second right now, but he’s expressed his interest, so it’s technically on the table. Fact of the matter is that your name has a lot of indie cred these days. It rings out. And whether or not this deal goes through depends a lot on your decision here.”

“So, what you are saying,” I said, “is that either I accept to do the record your way, or else they don’t get the deal at all? Or worse they get the deal and make the record with Steve fuckin’ Jennings?”

“That may very well be the case.”

“I really don’t know,” I said.

“I know you’re saying this based on principle,” he said. “I don’t want to insult you here, but in case it makes any difference, it’s a lump sum for you just to record the thing. Your fee. Guaranteed.”

“I’m not sure I’m the right person for this, Tom.”

“Look,” he said. “At least think about it. You don’t have to make a decision straight away. Production wouldn’t even start until next year. We’re just trying to figure things out as early as we can.”

I shook his hand and agreed to let him know within a week. I mentioned I was on my way to the Keys as I was leaving and he gave me a box of Dominican cigars and said it was what one should do there. “Just sit back on a long chair,” he said. “Close your eyes, light up one of these, and pretend you’re somewhere in the Caribbean.”

On the drive down that night, somewhere in Virginia it started to rain and Fogerty was cutting in and out on the radio while I got stuck behind a wobbling truck going sixty I didn’t dare pass. In the rear-view mirror I could see that Sara had fallen asleep staring out the window, with her face squished up against the wings of her seat. Isabel was also asleep next to her. Though I had hoped to make it to at least North Carolina that night, I decided I’d pull over at the next motel instead.

The rest area didn't come for another thirty miles, though, and as the rain kept tapping against the roof of the old car, I felt like I'd made my mind up about Tom. So what if it would mean saying no to a huge payday? It's not like I was in it for the cash.

When we got to Key West, I was the first to point out that the house looked nothing like the one in the pictures. It was still near the beach, though, Isabel said.

It was almost warm enough to swim as I sat out on a chair that afternoon, smoking one of Tom's Aging Room Concertos and staring off at the calm clear ocean, bright sun burning against the back of my neck. They say you can almost see Cuba on a clear day, but I could only see the line of the horizon despite there not being a single cloud in the sky. I had a beat-down classical guitar I'd found in a closet inside the house and it stood upright against my chair. Fifty yards down a Cuban man hand-rolled cigars and sold them out of his stand. He'd sit there all day, rolling, and then he'd leave—probably to drive back home to Miami, I imagined. Isabel had told me again how I shouldn't do anything I didn't want to do. That they say integrity is all one's got at the end of the day and that we'd be fine either way. She was inside sleeping after a morning in the sun and Sara was asleep by her side. There were thundershowers on the way, they'd said, but I still couldn't see a cloud in sight as I scanned the sky for one. A wind was coming from the west, blowing the smoke from my cigar down to where a family was sitting, thirty yards downwind, in the sand with their young daughter and infant son, and it rustled my tilted parasol. I turned my chair and left the cigar burning in the ashtray, watching it redden with every gust until it eventually went out on its own. I picked up the guitar and strummed some chords and enjoyed the way they echoed out into the open space. Isabel came out through the backdoor with two glasses of rum and cola, garnished with orange wedges, baby monitor in the crook of her arm, and put it all down on the table before lowering herself into the chair beside me. I took a sip of the drink and it felt refreshing and cool. She took out a cigarette from the pack on the table and glanced at the sky behind us as a gust of wind knocked the lighter off

the table. "Do you think there'll be a storm today?" she said reaching down to pick it up. No flame came out as she spun the sparkwheel, and she sighed and gave the lighter and cigarette to me. Turning my body towards the chair I lit it and handed it to her. "That's what they're saying," I said. She took the cigarette from my hand, then a sip of her drink as she removed her sunglasses, and looked down at the tide slowly coming inwards. "It's not like they're always right, though, are they?" she said.

*

The evening I spent at *Cinema L'Amour* watching the premiere of Jay's hundred-and-forty-six-minute *Poon Velvet: Uncut* was among the more bizarre I'd experienced in my life. On my own in the back row, I spotted local artists and critics, minor celebrities and even a few well-known faces, there guzzling sodas and lobbing popcorn into their mouths like they were watching Bruce Willis barrelroll under eighteen-wheelers; Jay and the cast sat front row drinking Cava and Aperol spritz, their eyes intent on their creation, a love pentagon gone wrong, a sort of sexual game somewhere between Risk and Eurovision, the international intrigue told obliquely through characters in a hostel said to be at the tri-junction between Austria, Hungary and Slovakia (though in one shot you could clearly see the orange glow of the Park Avenue *Pizza Pizza* sign through the window) after they'd been snowed in. There were handycam shots madly interspersed with static, and moaning audio Jay had run through a delay pedal to create a rapid staccato loop, first panned hard left then as it built up whirling round the room frenetically, cutting to a cliffhanger scene where the protagonist—played by the muttonchopped guy I'd seen at his apartment—tried to escape through an air vent.

Applause roared when the credits rolled, and when the house lights switched on, everyone was looking around as if expecting Jay to take the stage and say a few words, but Jay was not even there anymore.

This being typical of Jay, I wasn't even surprised—I just put my coat back on and went out the door and headed down the Main to look for him. I found him at Korova later that evening, sitting on his own at the end of the bar, hangdog in front of a shot of Jameson and a pint.

"I'm so done with that stuff," he slammed back his shot of whiskey, straight away signaling the waitress for a refill. "What the hell was I even thinking?"

“You’re being hard on yourself, man,” I said pulling up a stool. “They all loved it. This guy from the Gazette was there trying to find you after the screening. He had questions for you—I heard him saying how he thought it was the weirdest thing he’d ever seen. You’re nuts to have run off like that.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point,” he grumbled. “They weren’t supposed to love it. Not like that at least.”

“I had a feeling the whole thing was meant as some kind of ironic sociological experiment.” His head tilted as he raised his shot glass to his mouth. “I guess you were one of the few, dog.”

The AC was broken, the heat barely sufferable. Sweat dribbled down Jay’s forehead like he was facing the bright lights of a cop-show interrogation. Over at the end of the bar, the waitress was talking to a bro-type with a backwards Blue Jays cap. Someone was playing the Pacman machine and it emitted the 8-bit descending scale of defeat.

“So what’s next?” I asked him.

“Fuck if I know,” he raised his hands before letting them drop to his thighs with a thud. “More shorts probably. I’m just so damn tired of having to shoot Tide commercials and wedding videos to finance them, you know?”

“What about the grant you applied for? The one for the feature?”

He shook his head. “Negative—they thought the budget was *unrealistic*.”

“So how much would you need to shoot it?”

“Way more than you’ve got, man... if that’s where you’re going with this. Listen, I know you just signed this big payday and all, and I appreciate the thought—but this here is my own thing.”

I made a deal with Jay later that night, where if he helped me build my studio I’d let him use it to score films whenever he wanted, for as long as the studio was mine. And over the next weeks

he and I must've visited at least a few dozen spaces before finding the old three-storey Mile Ex textile building on St. Urbain that would eventually become home to Park Lane Studios. I even told Jay he could help me manage the building if he wanted to, help me sublet one of the vacant floors and what not, and use the other for shoots.

He and I spent three months sorting through the broken glass, soundproofing walls, finding gear, and by the end of that summer I recorded my first album there. And though it was from its conception an analogue studio, I bought a desktop computer and a copy of Pro Tools to prepare for the Bells record.

By the time Bells of Passion came to record I'd already made a dozen albums at Park Lane—all of which were on tape. I knew going in I couldn't repeat the mistakes I'd made with the Nör-Nör album, so I sat down with the band and told them that, even though we were going to do it on Pro Tools, we'd have to pretend we had a limited number of tracks and never resort to cutting corners. But as I said that, I realized it was mostly myself I was trying to convince.

It didn't take very long to notice how some of the band's occasional habits had, since I'd last worked with them, grown with the success of their careers. But as long as they came up with great material I kept my mouth shut. It wasn't really my business. We were way behind schedule, however, and soon I was there pulling all-nighters to catch up, cleaning up tracks and getting the EQ right to save time in the mix. To a point I, too, started dabbling in their stash.

We missed the initial deadline by four months, something Island wasn't exactly thrilled about—they'd wanted the album out in time for the holiday rush. Why, exactly? Fuck if I know. Bells of Passion didn't exactly make the type of record you'd expect to see stuffed in a Christmas stocking along with something like Bubblé humming the Yuletide public domain or what not. Then again, the only kind of records that made it as stocking stuffers by then were sixteen-digit download codes.

In the end, Island pushed the album back till summer, out of spite it seemed—in the process dooming it commercially. Or so we thought: *Walk Away from the Falling Leaves*'s lead-off single scored a spot on the soundtrack of an indie film, with a near-negative budget, that ended up beating out most of the summer blockbusters at the box-office, which boosted the album into the Billboard top 10.

Jenn's debut had never come close to the commercial success Bells had, but the critics loved her, and so as far as Malware Records were concerned, any artistic direction Jenn wanted to take was entirely her call. At least it was so at that point. She ended up turning her solo project into a full band; her brother joined on guitar and they renamed themselves *The Illegal Streams*. When she first showed me stuff they'd been working on, she said they were still at least a year away from being ready to record a full-length, but even from the little material they had, and from Jenn's usual modesty being upped a notch, you could tell they were working on something special.

"These songs sound great," I said to her. "Really great."

"Really?" she said.

"Yes, *really*."

"Does that mean we'll get do it at Park Lane?"

"Why wouldn't you?" I said.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe you're too busy these days."

"I'll hold it against you if you don't."

A few months after Bells' *Walk Away from the Falling Leaves* was released, Island invited me to their summer party, held on a yacht cruising around Manhattan. Isabel and I decided we'd make a weekend out of it and left Sara with my parents, opting for the Greyhound to New York City over the plane. We'd picked up a bottle of rum at the duty-free, cracking it open on the back seats and

sharing it with a couple of college girls from Albany. Shortly after they got off at their stop, Isabel fell asleep. We were still four hours away from New York and I stayed awake the whole time, sipping rum and staring at the darkness outside.

When we got to New York we took a cab to the Hilton in Times Square, where we ordered burgers and wine to our room at ten in the morning, waiting for a dealer I knew to swing by the hotel. By noon we were dressed and out again and braving the smog on foot towards Battery Park; by two drinking white wine in the shade in front of a bar in Soho, where we watched people go by until half past three, when we started making our way towards the boat again.

When we walked onto the boat we were already stumbling—especially me. A few artists and producers were there, but mostly it was execs, investors, and significant others who looked as bored as we did. As soon as we left the dock, I wished I'd never gotten on. Isabel and I must've had six or seven glasses of champagne each before dinner was served, and so by the time we sat down we were sliding off our chairs. Clay Brooks, the multifaceted music-industry tycoon, was sitting to my left, with producer Steve “fuckin’” Jennings, who'd done the last Jimmy Beaton album, at the time top of the charts, sitting next to him. Clay was jiving about how well the Beaton record was doing, how it was a miracle for a record to go double-platinum in that day and age.

“Getting a shit record to go platinum is a miracle in any day and age,” I yelled out.

Clay restrained a laugh and Isabel burst out, but everyone else stayed silent.

Isabel and I talked mostly to each other throughout the dinner, but they'd occasionally try to reel us in, Clay bringing up *Bells of Passion* and how great the record was, a likely Grammy-nod, to which I responded that it was only less shit than the Beaton record, and that you'd never catch me at the fuckin' Grammys anyway. We excused ourselves to go snort coke in the women's bathroom, even explicitly stating that as our reason, where another one of the label A&R guys' wife from our table, walked in while Isabel was sitting on the sink. Isabel offered her the bag and she dug in, too.

When we sat back down, a bow-tied guy, mid-20s, was standing next to Clay. They were talking about the Ramones, and the bow-tied guy was saying how he wished he'd been around in that era to see them play.

"That's what they all say," I said.

"Sorry?" the guy responded.

"Everyone talks about these great musical eras," I said reaching across for a bottle to refill our glasses. "With so much insight now, in retrospect, always saying how they wished they'd been there, too. As if somehow simply being alive at that time would have meant you'd magically be clued into the music that, let's face it, only a very small amount of people listened to. On a mainstream scale at least."

"I was just—"

"Realistically," I said. "If you'd been alive back then you'd probably have been listening to the top 40 crap that was popular then. Wings and Hall & Oates and Barry fuckin' Manilow and what not." Isabel put her hand on my knee and squeezed. Clay laughed. "And I say this with all due respect— sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Bill," he said. "Bill Krantz."

"No slight, Bill," I continued. "But you get my point. It's easy to glorify the past, decades removed, and make yourself believe you'd have your ear to the ground, if only you'd been there."

"We're all in the industry, after all," Clay said. "If anyone would have their ear to the ground..."

"Plenty of good bands out there still undiscovered while we sit around here cruising round Ellis Island knocking back Dom Perignon," I said.

"We can't discover them all," Krantz said.

"Why even pretend you discover any of them?"

“What exactly bothers you about this?”

“It bothers me to hear people reach a certain age and say how they sure don’t make records like they used to. That there just ain’t no good music out there anymore. Just because you’re too lazy to look for it.” Isabel squeezed my knee, harder this time. “Again, I don’t necessarily mean you gentlemen personally. More of a general *you*.”

Krantz was stirring his martini with a swizzle stick, looking up at the stars above Jersey, head bobbing sideways to and fro. “But wait, aren’t you supposed to be the analogue guy?” he said. “How’s that not glorifying the past?”

“It’s a different kind of past,” I shrugged. “I favour the format because of its relationship to the recording process. That relationship is what defines the sound—not the tape reel itself. But yes, there’s something there I miss. Everything you hear on the radio you can just tell the chorus has been copy pasted to sound the same each time, to a point you can’t even picture someone singing the song in a studio, just a producer at his desk, dragging his mouse hitting control C, control V. It takes the whole human error element right out of it.

“I miss the relationship we had with music as listeners just the same,” I continued, “but I’ve not quit listening to new music. Next time someone—outside the record industry I mean—says something to you about there not being any good music anymore, ask them what new releases they liked, or even hated, in the last year. If they’re stumped, try the last five years! If they can’t name a single one, ask them to name their ten favourite albums of all time and make a note of how many of those they were probably listening to in fuckin’ high school.”

“So most people hit a certain age and they stop listening to new music, is what you’re trying to say. But that’s how it’s always been.”

“I’m saying there are still people out there who go to shows and read about every single new release and if you ask them their favourite albums of the year they’ll pull hairs out trying to narrow the

list down to fifty!” Clay laughed as he tried to light a cigar with a match, to no avail. “And as for the rest of them, who can sing along to all the hits on the radio and still go around speaking of golden ages, unable to name a single recent release they’ve listened to top to bottom, for them, I’d say that the mainstream record industry has been a colossal failure.”

Clay and Krantz looked at each other.

“You’re really passionate about this stuff,” Clay said. “I get that. And I know you probably think we’re a bunch of corporate assholes just here to make money, but we’re music fans, too. At the end of the day we gotta keep things profitable, which is getting harder by the day.”

“No one told you not to make money,” I said. “But maybe the decades of taking both the listener and artist for a fool have come around to bite you all in the ass. Maybe addressing that would be a start.”

When the boat finally docked Isabel and I were barely able to stand, but we took a cab to the East Village and found a bar where a punk band was playing. We sat at a table at the back sipping our pints of beer. The band wasn’t great but the kids seemed to dig it and knew all the words to the songs. Some snarling kid next to us asked if we’d gotten lost on the way to the opera; I tried to make a crack about him being stuck in the ‘70s but the words never came out right. Nonetheless we sat at the back until the bar emptied, and then made our way uptown on foot, stopping for a bottle of whiskey at a 24-hour bodega on the way and ending up north of 59th Street, jumping the gate into the park, where we sat on the stands by the baseball diamond at 5am with the daylight starting to peak through the buildings. The same homeless person would pass by every now and then pushing a cart, never even noticing us, or ignoring us completely if he did. I had been awake for almost forty-eight hours straight and started to wonder if the homeless man was really even there. Isabel was wearing my jacket on her shoulders as we sat there smoking cigarette after cigarette.

“Isn’t this much better than a stupid fuckin’ yacht?”

“Depends,” she said. “It wouldn’t be if we were here with the yacht crowd.”

I heard rustling coming from the bushes behind us and looked to see if it was the homeless person back again, but saw it was two NYPD officers patrolling the park on foot. One of them came over and told us the park was closed and that we’d have to get out.

“We’re terribly sorry,” I said getting up. “We were on our way back from the opera and we just took a wander on the way home.”

“Pretty sure whatever opera you were at was done many hours ago,” the other cop said. “And you’re not allowed to have liquor in here. Put that away.”

“Sure thing, officer,” Isabel said exaggerating the remnants of her accent. “We’ll be on our way.”

He pointed to a path that’d lead us to the closest exit and told us not to come back to the park at night, saying it wasn’t safe. We made our way back down to Times Square in that time of day where street cleaners outnumbered all the other vehicles on the road. You had a few people still awake, but mostly last night’s rubbish strewn across the empty streets. We ordered scrambled eggs to our room and ate in bed. Outside I saw the world wake up for the third time since I’d last been to sleep, and as the deflected sunlight beamed through our window, I stood up and drew the curtains on Times Square before getting under the covers. I kissed Isabel’s forehead as she was about to fall asleep.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too,” she mumbled.

I still couldn’t manage to fall asleep. My heart was racing from all the blow I’d done the previous night, and so I went down to the hotel bar and ordered a whiskey to calm myself down. The first one barely took the edge off and the second only started to make me feel like I could

someday sleep again; by the third I was falling off my fist, and the barman asked if I needed help getting back to my room.

“I’m alright,” I said, telling him I’d have a last smoke outside and head back up, that he didn’t need to worry about me. I tipped him \$20 and wandered past the entrance to halfway down the block to where a homeless man was begging for change.

“Mind if I sit here?” I said pointing to the spot on the curb next to him.

“Free country,” he said.

“Looks like it’s trying hard to rain, isn’t it?” I said looking up at the dark clouds directly over us. “Thank God. This heat’s enough to make you lose your damn mind.”

“God?” he said, his voice soft and uninflected. “What the hell do you know about God, son?”

“Not a whole lot, I suppose.”

“I guess it’s just as well,” he smiled. “Just now this white boy came past wearing an *I love Jesus* t-shirt. Those guys are usually the first to burn in hell.”

I lit a cigarette and gave him one, too.

“Son,” he said examining my face, “forgive me for saying, but you look like shit.”

“I know,” I said.

“I mean, if I had a mirror here and held it up in front of you, I ain’t even sure I’d get a reflection out of you.”

“That bad?” I laughed.

“That bad.”

“I haven’t really slept much these past few days.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Look who you’re talking to.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Where you from, son?” he said.

“Canada.”

“Canada!?” he said. “Mighty cold up there. Been there once. On a basketball tournament. Toronto. Spring of ’86, I think. We whooped those boys’ asses. Long time ago, son—I don’t remember much. Hey, since you’re out here sitting on the sidewalk for God-knows-what reason, how about you and I play a game of cards? Whatchya say, son?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Come on, just a quick one.”

“Alright.”

“How about three-card monte?”

“I said I was Canadian. I didn’t say I was gullible.”

“I’m just kidding, son,” he smiled putting two cards face up, totalling sixteen, in front of me.

“Play a round of Blackjack with me. I’ll deal.”

“Alright,” I said. “Hit me.”

“At sixteen? Not a wise move, kid.”

“Five—that’s twenty-one.”

“Shit, maybe you do know what you’re doing after all.”

“Maybe I do,” I said. “Let’s go again.”

“Alright,” he said before putting down a six of clubs and an eight of spades.

“Hit me.”

“Twenty-one again. Boy, you need to take that luck down to A-C,” he said shaking my hand before giving the cards a shuffle. “I’m Merv, by the way.”

“Merv, listen,” I said. “How about we make the next hand a little interesting.”

“You want to go after a homeless man’s change and cans?” he said.

“Just... twenty dollars?” I said. “For fun.”

“Fine,” he frowned, pausing for a second before dealing sixteen. “You know I ain’t got twenty dollars, though, right? Just so we clear. I ain’t even got no cans.”

“Hit me.”

“Don’t be a fool. You can’t keep hitting at sixteen.”

“It’s worked for me so far,” I said. “And you have that Jack, Merv. I’m gonna need that twenty-one.”

“Eight. That’s you bust.”

“Alright let’s put that one on my tab. Double or nothing.”

“If I didn’t know any better I’d think a Canadian boy was trying to hustle me here in my own city.”

“Just deal, Merv.”

“Seventeen.”

“Hit me.”

“Five. Bust.”

“Damn,” I said.

“You think I don’t see what you’re doing, boy? I ain’t no fool.”

“I know you’re no fool, Merv.”

“Twelve.”

“Hit me.”

“Bust.”

“Fuck.”

“Then why you doing it? Did you come here to play white saviour, too?” he smiled.

“Because if you did, get in line.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Or let me guess... You think a few minutes chatting with a homeless man will provide you some sort of epiphany on how you oughta live your life?”

“How much I owe you, Merv?”

“You owe me nothing, son.”

“I owe you... forty bucks,” I said. “Double or nothing.”

“I suppose,” he said. “What have I got to lose, right? Do I even have to deal? We know which way this is going.”

“Come on, Merv. Last one, I promise.”

“That’s fourteen.”

“Hit me.”

“Twenty-one,” he said. “Now don’t tell me you want a hit on a goddamn twenty-one!”

“Fine, Merv,” I laughed. “I won’t. If it makes you happy.”

Merv smiled. “Let’s see what I got. Well, look at that! I got twenty-one, too! Push.”

“No push, Merv. You know house wins a draw.”

He laughed. “Of course it does.”

I took out the two bills left in my wallet—two hundreds—and placed them into Merv’s hand.

“Thanks for the game, Merv,” I said. “I’m gonna try and get some sleep now.”

“I ain’t no hustler,” he said, “but if it means two-hundred dollars less going up your damn nose, I’ll take your money, kid.”

“That’s a deal, Merv.”

“Now go get some sleep, son. For the love of God.”

“Will do. Later, Merv.”

“Yeah, man,” he said. “Later.”

two.

From the lobby erupts a clatter and it spills into the room as a group of four appears. They swagger over to the bar and each pull up a stool, their posture a dead giveaway for their being flight attendants, light features and prominent cheekbones suggesting Scandinavian origins. One of them wears the handlebar mustache you rarely see outside of Victorian portraits, and he's twirling the tip of the kaleidoscopic curl as he points to one of the beer taps with his free hand, then sits down on the stool with enough momentum to force a pivot.

As I swallow the last drops left in my wine glass I feel as though the cherub's gaze is fixed upon me, but the moment I turn my head to meet it, I see his eyes back up at the heavens, his expression more despondent than ever. Scanning the room for the waitress, I spot her all the way at the other end, so I get up and bring my charger to the bar, excusing myself as I slip between the count and his colleague to hand the phone over to the bartender, who plugs it in by a beer fridge. I turn back towards my table but the count's colleague is now blocking my path.

"I know you," she says wagging a finger, an animated expression overtaking her face.

"Do you?" I say.

"You're... That producer!"

I give a chuckle, amused mostly by her failed attempt to summon my name. "I'm not sure which one you mean," I say to her. "But I guess you may be right—I'm *a* producer, at least."

Producer—what a dreadful word it is when you stop and think about it. Something synonymous with manufacturing, construction, fabrication. Things you did with lies—not with art. With collusion, not creation. It sounds so awful to me when I hear it said aloud. Even worse when I'm the one saying it.

The count overhears our exchange and swivels around to face us, and after a moment, he's pointing, also pausing as if to place me. "You made *Transistor*," he then declares with a self-congratulatory laugh between sips from a frothy mug. "One of my favourite albums ever." He

makes this diagonal slashing gesture with his hand, as if to signify something categorical and beyond dispute.

Transistor was a Nör-Nör album—the last one they’d done before signing with Virgin—and so, of course, it was one I had nothing to do with.

“Did I?” I reply, perhaps coming off more coy than intended.

“Yes,” he lets out another piercing laugh. “Yes, you did.”

“You’re probably right,” I say. “It was a long time ago, after all. Some of those years are kind of blurry.”

And with nothing more than a nod and smile, I let them get back to their conversation and head over to my table.

Back when we were making that Nör-Nör album—the one I’d actually recorded—at what was possibly the pinnacle of my short-lived indie cred, I was rarely short of the sort of rhetoric I’d now be quick to dismiss as utter bullshit. In this one interview, I was telling a journalist how in every record I made I saw dormant spirits waiting to be raised. How, like Lazarus, the best ideas were often at their most pungent right before they came to life. I was a self-indulgent prick—but part of me now envies that prick for being able to just go with it. For believing music was that important. For believing it could stir things up in you like that—capable of changing just about anything.

Isabel once told me about a famous painter whose name escapes me now. The painter had said, later in his life, how when he’d look at his paintings he’d realize he’d long lost the ability to feel them. So instead he’d imagine watching himself paint through the eyes of his younger self. As a disconnected third person that could still feel what the first person would see and do. That’s how I’d often feel. It’s how I’d felt for quite a while. I’d even seen this coming for a long time. But whenever I’d ask Isabel what she thought about while she painted, she’d usually say how she would try not to think about anything at all. How if you stopped to think about things, it’d ruin the whole point of it.

At least it would for her. So sometimes I'd watch her paint, imagining her mind drawing a complete blank as she did it, as her brush would hit the canvas at this angle, or that angle, and I really would have a hard time believing this could all be down to gut instinct.

Outside the snow is dense and falling aslant against the curb. There's so much of it on the ground now that no one's slipping anymore. Just confident and uninterrupted strides—one after the other. A snowstorm, I think to myself. As if Jay's punctuality needs another excuse. This is the guy who'd produced a doctor's note in grade nine gym saying he had *lateness disease* to get out of swim class after seeing someone pull a similar stunt on 20/20 the week before. Once I get my phone back, I'll at least have something to do other than just think. No—the irony isn't lost on me. There's no real irony here. When you're the analogue guy, people think you're just rebelling against technology. It's not like that at all. But there's no point trying to change people's minds.

Leaving my coat on my chair I saunter over to the door and step outside to light a cigarette on the front steps. As I watch the smoke billow out into the cold air, a blue light flickers from the dormer window of a penthouse on the opposite corner, interrupting a rare moment of stillness in which spirits forgotten under the paved Old Montreal cobblestone would have been given a sporting chance to rise. The flickering dies just as a taxi cab blows its horn at a pedestrian dragging his feet from curb to curb. Starting to feel a chill I flick my butt into the snow-laden street and go back through the doorway, where I walk over to my seat and notice my glass has been refilled while I was gone. As I sit down, I try looking the cherub in the eye but he's pulling the same trick, ditching me again in favour of his celestial orbs and dwellings.

“Cheer up, ol' cherub,” I say to him, pausing for a sip. “There's still hope for you—you're not beyond saving yet. When the music can't save you anymore, that's when you'll need to worry. Because—well—good luck finding something else in this fuckin' place that can save the things that save us.”

*

Going to France wasn't something we'd ever really planned. The whole thing was even kind of a fluke. Sara's fourth birthday was coming up and Wa Lapli was working out of my studio, recording a rap group who'd flown in from Paris to make an EP with him. A rep from their label was often there with them, and whenever I'd pass by the studio he'd join me around the corner for a coffee. We got to talking one morning, and he mentioned a villa he owned outside Nice that he rented out for most of the year. By the end of that day, we'd agreed to a trade: I'd wipe out the three weeks of studio time off their bill in exchange for the keys to his villa.

I knew Isabel would be thrilled by the idea—she'd always wanted to go to Paris—and though this wasn't exactly Paris, we could easily take the train up for a few days. I figured this trip would also give Sara the chance to practice her French. She'd recently started to show a fascination for French-Canadian kids' shows—always favouring them over any of the ones on CBC or PBS. Perhaps this was because she couldn't understand a word, but she'd sit there rapt, staring right through the T.V.. She'd repeat the words she'd hear, pronouncing them not like the actors on T.V., but like Isabel would, or like Americans who'd spent summers in Paris growing up—what Isabel referred to as *a Jean Seberg kind of way*.

The excitement, however, for Sara was short-lived, eclipsed from the moment she'd learned we wouldn't be going there by car.

“Fly?” she said. “What do you mean—fly? Like, in a real airplane? Are you out of your mind?”

Isabel was sitting in the corner of the room, peering at me over a magazine through narrowed eyes, as if to suggest my genes were somehow to blame for this predicament.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” I said to Sara. “People fly all the time. At this very moment, there are millions of people up there above us in the sky—flying.”

“I didn’t say I was scared,” Sara shook her head. “I just don’t want to. Two very different things.”

“But why wouldn’t you want to?” I asked.

Sara shrugged. “I just don’t—ok?”

“Planes are just like cars,” I said. “Just a lot quicker. The flight will go by like that,” I added with a snap of my fingers. “Besides, you’ve been on planes before.”

After considering this for a moment, she pursed her lips and folded her arms, then stomped the ground with her heel. “I’m not going,” she said.

Over the next few days, I tried what I could to reason with her, but nothing seemed to work. One evening, Jay and I were out having a beer and he’d suggested I hadn’t fully explored the potential of reverse psychology here and implored me to let him have a crack at it. Part of me was even indignant at the idea of taking parenting advice from Jay, but I wanted to avoid having Sara in a snit for the entire trip, so I told him to go for it. He and I finished our beers and walked down the block to ours where the four of us sat together in the den.

“It’s too bad you won’t be going to France, kiddo,” Jay said to Sara. “I heard there’s a ton of fun to be had there. What with all that chocolate and all. Such a shame your dad is so scared of planes that he had to go out and cancel the trip.” Jay sneered over at me, still addressing Sara, “A real scaredy cat, isn’t he?”

Sara, who was on the floor flipping cards from a deck she held in her hand, propped her head up like a meerkat. “Cancelled?”

“Yeah,” Jay said. Addressing me now, “You know—you didn’t have to cancel the whole thing just ’cause you didn’t want to go,” he said. “I’d have offered to take your place. Sara and I would have had a great time lounging on the beach.”

“Cancelled?” Sara repeated pulling on Jay’s sleeve.

“I’m afraid so,” Jay said, now up on his feet and walking over towards the entrance to put on his boots, knowing when to make his exit, and as he reached for the doorknob he pulled a half-turn and looked right at Sara. “You can always try changing his mind,” he said. “But, you know, it’s probably no use. Sorry, kid. Better luck next time.”

Jay gave Isabelle and me a wink and went out the door. Sara ran up the stairs to her room and I turned to Isabel, rolling my eyes to convey my being less than impressed with Jay’s strategy. But later that same evening I was lying on the couch with my eyes shut and headphones on, and at one point I felt a tap on my shoulder, and as I looked up I saw Sara standing next to me, holding her toy pig by the wrist, gesturing me to take off my headphones.

“Hey there, kitten?” I said to her. “What’s up?”

“You know…” she said climbing up onto the couch. “I’ve been thinking… You really shouldn’t be scared of flying.”

“Is that so?” I said. “And why not?”

“Because,” she said pointing at the ceiling. “People up there fly all the time.”

*

The house we had was in Antibes and tucked away behind a hill. On most days, I'd wake up with the sun and run to the top, privy to a glimpse of the Mediterranean before anyone else on the coast. I'd usually run back and read the paper on the veranda while waiting for Isabel and Sara to get up, and we'd go to the beach in Antibes after breakfast. Isabel and I would open a bottle of wine in the afternoon during Sara's nap; we'd get her dressed and take a taxi into Cannes or Nice, where we'd have dinner somewhere in the old town and we'd head back to Antibes and put Sara to bed.

I was sitting outside one morning after my run, reading an opening day preview of the Cannes Film Festival in the paper. Sara walked into the kitchen and after spotting me through the window she ran onto the veranda. Her long brown hair, sheening auburn in the sunlight, made her look more and more like her mother. I folded my paper and kissed her forehead, then sat her down on the chair next to me and asked her how her night had been. It'd been fine, she said, but she'd dreamt of spiders.

That afternoon we wandered down to the public beach in Antibes, where we lounged under parasols with Orangina logos, once in a while jumping in and out of the cold sea. We had dinner in a nearby fish restaurant, and when Isabel and Sara went home, I took a cab into Cannes to get a glimpse of the festival's opening night.

Roman candles lit up the seafront and the streets were jammed with people. I wandered narrow radial roads until I found a quiet bistro, where I pulled myself a chair on the patio and ordered a glass of white wine. I had the festival program with me and was reading about a Swedish-Icelandic co-production about a recovering junkie's trials in the outskirts of Stockholm when a man in a suit, loosened tie and worn-out eyes, sat down at the table next to me, ordering a bourbon in a

southern U.S. drawl. I reached into my jacket pocket for my smokes and after lighting one put the pack on the table. In broken French the man asked me if I could spare one.

“Help yourself,” I said, flicking the open packet closer to him.

“You speak English,” he said giving a laugh. “That’s a relief—my French is damn rusty.” He took out a smoke and lit it. “Thanks,” he said holding it up. “Just got in from the airport and I haven’t seen a single *Tabac* open around here.”

“There’s never one open when you need one,” I said.

“I should’ve just bought some at the duty-free,” he said. “Slipped my mind.”

I nodded and flipped my magazine to the next page.

“So what part of the States you from?” he continued.

“Canada,” I said.

He presented his open palms as if to apologize for his transgression. “In the industry?” he asked pointing to the magazine.

I shook my head. “I’m in the music biz. Just here on vacation.”

“Music biz?” he said, his curiosity piqued.

I told him about the Bells of Passion and the Illegal Streams, and he said he loved Jenn’s solo stuff and was eager to hear what the Streams were about.

“What’s it been now—three years or so?” he asked. “When’s she making that new one?”

“As soon as I get back home,” I said. “That’s the idea.”

I left the cigarettes on the table and told the man to help himself should he want more. Not long after, when the waiter walked by, the man called him over and ordered another bourbon, adding to also bring one of whatever I was drinking. After the waiter brought them over, I thanked the man for the drink and reached over and knocked glasses with him. He then moved his chair over to my table. He said his name was David and that he was an arts editor for the *Dallas Tribune*,

and he'd come to Cannes every year, mainly because the parties were out of this world. He told me how he'd just flown in from Dallas and walked over from the Meridien Hotel for a quiet nightcap, which he said was the only sure way to beat the jetlag.

It was warm and the festival crowd had begun to spill over to where we were. I was feeling a buzz keeping up with David, whose quiet drink had turned into several, as he mandered on about all the great events he was going to and all the stars who were meant to be there, at one point suggesting I come along with him.

"Thanks for the offer," I said finishing the last of my drink. "But I'm here on a family trip. There won't be many late nights for me."

I told David I needed to get home. He then gave me his email address in case I changed my mind and I thanked him before walking to the taxi rank on the corner.

It was late when I woke up the next morning. Sara was already in her swimsuit, with an oversized straw hat on her head. She grabbed my hand and pulled it while explaining how we'd already missed out on valuable hours of beach time and therefore needed to hurry. We cabbied it into Nice and walked up and down the Promenade des Anglais before settling on the main rocky beach. As we lay underneath our parasols Sara ran figure-eights around us, complaining that the smaller rocks were hurting her feet. Isabel and Sara walked along the shore while I sat in the shade. At one point I could barely see them, and then they started getting bigger and bigger again.

As Isabel sat back down, Sara refused to let go of her hand. "I want to go back to the sandy beach," Sara said.

"Tomorrow," Isabel said.

"Fine," Sara said letting go. "Then take me swimming," she added arms akimbo.

"Take her swimming, will you?" Isabel said to me as she took off her sunglasses. "I'm getting a headache."

I tied Sara's orange inflatable floaters around her arms and held her by the hand as we jostled through the beach towels and bodies to the sea. It was crowded and Sara asked if we could go somewhere quieter. I took her by the hand again and led her down the shore, and told her how if we swam out a little, we'd have fewer people around us.

"I don't want to go *too* far," she said.

"Just a little farther out," I said.

We swam twenty-or-so metres where it was just us and an older German-speaking couple. On the other side of the buoy line two young boys were riding around on a jet-ski, making dogleg turns, cackling as they watched the waves swell towards the shoreline. Sara's fears of the deep soon subsided, and she was jouncing and flapping her arms splashing the water around her. I'd pick her up and lift her above my head and pretend I was going to throw her as far as I could, and she'd unleash these piercing screams. I'd wind up as if I was actually going to throw her, but at the last second I'd gently put her back down in the water.

"Again," she'd say.

And so I'd do it again and the German couple would smile at us. Sara pointed to the horizon on the other side of the buoys, saying how that's where she wanted to go.

"Easy there, Flipper," I said.

I dove under her and she got scared when she couldn't see me anymore. I could hear the muffled sound of her screams as I swam underneath her. As I came back up to the surface I sat her up on my shoulders, facing the other direction, water in my ear making the shore sound like it was coming through a tin can as I heard Sara gasp and scream—more plaintive this time—unrestrained and plangent. I turned my head and saw the jet-ski skidding across the buoys, and I hurled Sara out of the way, towards the German woman, making a last effort to avoid the jet-ski. Something hit me above the eye—probably a rubber handlebar. At the speed it was going it should've killed me or at

least knocked me out, but I found myself under water, a cloud of someone's blood floating by, drawn to unconsciousness like a luxury I so badly wanted but couldn't afford. Out of the one eye that could still see I saw Sara's kicking and flailing limbs and swam towards her. I grabbed her by the waist and then hoisted her out of the water by her armpits. She was coughing, choking on water she had swallowed.

"Keep coughing, baby," I said. "Just cough it out."

But she stopped.

With my hands around her back and her eyes shut and her arms on each side dangling cruciform, a disquieting pallor stripping the afternoon sun off her cheeks, I knew I had to get her to shore, but I struggled to stay awake, in a two-way tug-of-war, tempted to give in to the same thing I was trying to pull her away from.

A crowd had formed and some men ran over and took Sara from me. She lay on the rocks as I tottered out of the water, surrounded by southern accents sounding singsong despite their urgency. "*L'ambulance arrive, Monsieur. On vient d'appeler.*"

On my knees I watched a lifeguard do C.P.R. on Sara, the whir of an ambulance siren appearing in earshot but the crowd already starting to disperse to make way for it.

Sitting in the back of the ambulance I held a gauze pad against the cut above my eye and it felt warm against my fingers.

"*Elle respire,*" one of the paramedics said, "*c'est bon signe au moins.*"

I nodded.

"She is breathing," the other one translated.

"That's good," I said.

"*Monsieur,*" the first paramedic shouted at me, flicking his fingers in my face. "You must not sleep."

I was woken up by a hand shaking me by the shoulder.

“Mister, I said you must not sleep.”

I took a pen from the paramedic’s shirt pocket and wrote down Isabel’s cell phone number on a piece of paper.

“But if I do,” I said, “please call this number and tell her where we are.”

“Of course,” he said taking the paper, “but you will not sleep.”

I was taken into a small room where they stapled shut the cut above my brow, feeling heavy-eyed and mollified on the hospital bed as the drugs began to kick in.

“How’s my daughter?” I asked.

“She’s resting,” the nurse said. “You need to rest, too.”

I was woken up by what I thought was the sound of heartbeat beeping, but as soon as I opened my eyes I realized the sounds were just something I’d made up in my head. Isabel was there, talking to a nurse by the edge of the room’s dividing curtain.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Upstairs,” Isabel said.

“Is she OK?”

“Still hasn’t woken up,” she said.

*

Distinguishing one form of unconsciousness from another relies entirely on the amount of time that passes. Whether you faint, you sleep, you're in a coma, it's all the same thing, really. Death is a different thing altogether.

But that's not something you want to be thinking about. Not there anyway.

Still sleeping... They kept using that word...

After two days on a separate floor, I was discharged and allowed to go up to the seventh, and when I got there I saw for myself that there really wasn't any other way to describe it. Not when it's someone so tiny. In sleep come dreams, though, and I wondered whether she was dreaming, hoping she wasn't, because with dreams come nightmares, and the only respite one can get from a nightmare is waking up.

But they reassure you and tell you with such conviction that there's no way she's dreaming; and somehow the certainty with which they say that makes you wonder if there's something they're hiding from you. What they *do* tell you, however, is that talking to her can trigger brainwaves and help her wake up, but what do you say, really? You sort of improvise on the spot.

"Do you remember last year when we went apple picking? That was a fun day, wasn't it? You wore that big hat because your mother was so scared of you getting burnt. I swear it was at least four times the size of your head. We must've walked a mile from the inn to get to the orchard, and we passed those rows of crabapple trees? You were so convinced crabapples were inedible. 'Daddy,' you said, 'can you pick one off the tree and eat it? I want to make sure they're not poisonous.' That made your mother laugh so much. You loved picking the apples already on the ground; not because you were too little then to reach them off the trees, but because you felt bad for them and said they needed to be loved, too. You're such a good kid. You said you'd learn to bake pies from your

mother, although to be honest I was sceptical because I wasn't sure your mother even knew how to bake a pie. She must've found a recipe or something, because I've never seen her bake anything in my life, but she did somehow teach you. And now you make a mean apple pie. Grandma says it's the best one she's ever had, and I would have to agree. Hey do you remember that time we played a trick on your mother when she came back from her mom's and you told her Daddy had fed you only Fruit Loops for the entire weekend? Do you remember? You were so convincing. She actually started to believe you. You should be an actress someday. Someday you could win an Oscar or something. Do you remember that time we went to Park Safari? The giraffes? You remember the giraffes? You liked their long necks. You didn't like the llamas so much because they reminded you too much of Mrs. Davidson. What did you enjoy most about that day, huh? Remember how we took you to Niagara to see your grandma and grandad's new place in the country, huh? Remember? You weren't even scared on the plane. Unlike your old man. You're a tough kid. You're tough as nails, sweetheart. I should've listened to you when you said you didn't want to come to France, baby. I really should've listened. Maybe you just knew something bad was going to happen. Did you know something bad was going to happen?

“...”

“...”

“...”

“When you wake up I promise I'll take you Disneyland. And I mean the good one in the U.S., not the shitty one here in France. Sorry love, I shouldn't swear. You'll meet Mickey and Pluto and we'll stuff our faces in cotton candy like we did at Coney Island last summer. We can even go see Zoltar again...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“These docs insist we come by and talk to you as much as we can. They’re convinced the sound of our voices can help you wake up. What do they know, right? I shared a room just downstairs with a 101-year-old man. Forty-three years ago they told him he had six months to live. Forty-three years! Can you believe that? He’s still around. He was just in here for a broken forearm. Broke it playing tennis. Out the next day. He even lived in Montreal for a while in the 1940s, in the middle of the war, and just like you he loves Schwartz’s and Wilensky’s and remembers them to this day, which is kind of funny because he called his own daughter Penelope when her name’s actually Annie. She was there to visit him and he started reciting a Hebrew prayer at one point, and Annie said he was praying for you...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Look, I brought you Pigzy. I’ll just put him next to you here. I brought you some music, too. I loaded about a thousand mp3s onto your iPod. Entire records from A to Z. Just the way we like it. What do you feel like listening to? I have *Abbey Road*, *Colour by Numbers*, *Purple Rain*, *Thriller*, I’ve also got some KMDFM—not sure how that got there. Got *Greetings from Asbury Park*, *Darkness of the Edge of Town*—pretty much everything Bruce’s ever done—if that’s what you want to listen to. I’ll just put on *Greetings* for you and you tell me if you want me to change it. Honey, Daddy has to go now because they don’t allow anyone to be in the room after nine, and I know it’s only eight thirty but your mother will come by in a little bit to be with you. I’ll be just down the hall if you need me. If there’s anything at all, sweetheart, I’ll be there. Rest well, my love. *Mwab*, I love you more than anything.”

And I stayed awake all night in the waiting room, greeting the first specks at the front door as I walked down a short path by a lavender garden, where I sat up on a bench's backrest, puffing on a cigarette as my reflection started to shimmer in *contre-jour* in the hospital's tall glass windowpanes. The gauze still wrapped around my head like a sweatband to cover the stitching made it hard to even squint. A tang of sea salt, diesel exhaust, and lavender wafted past the morning as I shooed away a honeybee that'd likely mistaken me for still life. I hadn't noticed the man in the wheelchair come down the path till he, too, shimmered in the window.

"*Bonjour*," he said.

"*Bonjour*," I said turning my head.

He pointed to his brow, frowning it, and I explained I'd been hit in the head by a jet-ski, to which he responded with a grimace.

"*Terrible*," he shook his head.

When I asked him why he was out there so early he said he was enjoying his favourite time of day in his favourite time of year, adding that that type of stillness simply didn't exist in his native Paris. He hummed a piece of music and I asked him what it was: one of Beethoven's late quartets, he said, explaining how those were among his favourite pieces of music ever written, the 14th and 15th in particular. The grass around us lush and soft I mentioned I'd maybe come back out there for a nap in the afternoon, how it looked far more comfortable than a waiting room bench. He asked me why a bench and not a bed and I told him about Sara and he nodded, blinking a slow and solemn blink. From his pocket he pulled out a bottle of Ambien and told me to help myself if I was having trouble sleeping. I took two but he gestured to keep going—so I took two more. Thanking him for it I said that maybe life would make a bit more sense once I'd finally managed to get some sleep, to which he smiled and, before wheeling himself away back up the path, responded that

making sense out of life would be robbing it of one of its greatest qualities. “*Elle est absurde,*” he said.

“*Elle ne fait aucun sens. Et c’est comme ça qu’on l’aime.*”

*

Waking up sprawled across three waiting room seats in the intensive care unit of the ESPIC it took me a few seconds to realize where I even was. Isabel was right behind me, and an old man with a cane sat on the opposite side. Isabel looked like she hadn't slept at all but she did her best to smile.

"Any news?" I said throwing my arm around her and resting my head on her shoulder.

"Nothing," she said. "They just called me over to come speak to her again. Maybe they noticed something happening in the brainwaves. She spoke, apparently."

"What did she say?"

"They said they couldn't make out any words. That they were just sounds."

Holding her, my face against hers, I could feel the dampness of her cheek as she now struggled to speak.

"They said that even if she wakes up at this point..."

"She *will* wake up."

"That even if she wakes up, there's a possibility of permanent brain damage."

Hand in hand we both stared at our shoes. Long ago had she and I become comfortable in each other's silence, and in that silence it was clear either one of us would trade places with Sara.

"I'm sorry I slept through this."

"I tried to wake you, but you just wouldn't."

"I took a few Ambien to sleep."

"On top of the pain killers?"

"Just this once. I hadn't slept in days."

"Who even gave them to you? A doctor here?"

"Some guy outside in a wheelchair. I had a smoke with him the other day."

“Please be careful,” she said.

“I will, I promise.”

Isabel held her head in her hands, trying to conceal the fact she was crying again. She wiped her face with her sleeve and I promised her things would be OK, even though I realized I had no right to make such promises.

*

Midnight in the ESPIC and I was sitting wide-awake on the waiting room benches staring at the news on the television screen while Isabel was downstairs trying to find something to eat. There was something about the French Open and something about Cannes. A doctor had dropped her glass bottle of iced tea in the corridor and it had shattered across the hallway. A stout woman was there to sweep up the shards.

The day before, Sara had tried to say something again, like she was almost interacting with what was going on out here. Isabel went to get the doctor, who examined Sara, but she just said that these things happen, and it didn't necessarily mean there was any progress.

On my phone I scrolled through music and came across a few unnamed mp3s. They were mostly mixes I'd done but never bothered to name. One of them was a recording of Sara, though. She was talking about some cartoon from what I could understand. I couldn't really make out what she was saying for most of it but I listened to all fourteen minutes of it anyway. I can't really explain the feeling of hearing her voice in that context, with her in bed in the next room—sleeping or whatever; I didn't really know if I wanted to smile or break down in tears. At one point I heard myself interrupting her monologue, and it surprised me in the way it's surprising to hear yourself speak when you don't expect it. I'd heard myself sing on recordings thousands of times but I was still for the most part unfamiliar with what my speaking voice sounded like. Isabel sounded like Rocky Balboa whenever she imitated something I'd said, and I had gotten used to hearing that version of me more than the actual one. There's something so strange about the fine line between the familiarity and strangeness of the sound of your own voice. To hear Sara's voice, Isabel's voice, my mother's, my father's, my brother's, Kelly's, Brandon's, Jay's, all I have to do is press the play button in my head and I hear it. But my own? I can only sort of hear it. And when I do it feels

neither foreign nor my own. This strange moment is like a quick jumper cable boost to my brainwaves before they have time to adjust and understand it's me I'm listening to.

It was after visiting hours but I didn't care. I walked up to the unit where Sara was, opening the main door quietly so to not wake up the kid in A who had broken his skull and all four limbs mountain biking. Sara was coughing when I walked into B. Autonomous response. I set the recording on repeat and placed the phone next to her ear. I kissed her forehead before pulling the unit's main door open to go back into the waiting room. Isabel was there, seated, a coffee in each hand.

For many, coincidence is the mother of delusion; that's why coincidence has converted more morons than all the missionaries through time put together. Miracles and superstition have always stood together, hand in hand at the altar. Do prayers do anything? Do they give you a sense of control? Can I actually control events around me with shapes and numbers? Could that be part-science? Probably not, but should I ever fully believe that until you prove to me I haven't avoided any larger disasters by doing so? Why should proof's burden be entirely on me?

It was shortly after 6am and Isabel was dozing off when I went outside for a cigarette. The guy who gave me the Ambien rolled out in his wheelchair and I gave him a smoke. He spoke to me in rather broken English this time but he was trying so damn hard that I didn't have the heart to remind him I understood French. I told him I hadn't slept and he offered me more Ambien, but I said I still had some left, that I would try to go without for a few days, even if it meant not sleeping at all. He asked about Sara and I told him we didn't really have any news. I asked him about how the recovery from his accident was going but he shook his head and told me it wasn't an accident that had him in a wheelchair, but A.L.S., and how some time in the next six months or so his respiratory muscles would follow his legs.

"Rien à faire," he shrugged.

He asked me if I could spare twenty minutes to take him around the block so that he could catch a morning glimpse of the tide. I wheeled him around Avenue de la Californie and then down to the Promenade des Anglais where the sea was azure and calm like in the Nice postcards.

“C’est fabuleux,” he said. *“N’est-ce pas?”*

I pushed him across the street to the part of the walkway that overlooks the beach and asked him if he’d ever seen *Les 400 Coups*. He said he didn’t think he had and that he never really liked movies anyway. He asked me why I wanted to know that.

“In the final scene, the kid runs into the sea. I was wondering if it was filmed near here.”

“J’en sais rien,” he said.

Across the road a café owner was putting out tables and chairs out for the day on the corner.

“Dis-donc,” the man in the wheelchair said to me, *“serait-il encore trop tôt pour un verre de vin?”*

I smiled and wheeled him across the street, where I sat him at a table in the sunlight.

“What would you like?” I asked him.

“Verre de rouge,” he said, *“s’il vous plait.”*

He reached into a chair pocket for his wallet but I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him. I walked over to the bar inside and asked the owner for two glasses of red, but the owner said he wasn’t allowed to serve any alcohol before 8am.

“C’est la nouvelle réglementation,” he shook his head.

He told me that if he were to get caught he would be fined, or possibly lose his license. I asked him for two Perriers instead and took out my wallet. All I had was a fifty-Euro bill.

I changed my mind and told him to forget the Perriers and placed the fifty on the bar.

“S’il vous plait?” I said again. *“On sera discret et on fera vite. Promis.”*

He peered through the window at the man sitting outside in a wheelchair and hospital gown and, finally, nodded.

“*Faites vite,*” he took the bill and said.

I brought out the two glasses of wine and we sipped them slowly, chain-smoking Gauloises while getting nervous looks from the owner peeking outside every now and then. It was quarter to eight when he took our empty glasses away, and the man in the wheelchair mentioned that if we waited another fifteen minutes we could order another glass and actually take our time. I told him I should probably get back to the hospital.

“Come on,” he said extending his hand at the sea. “Which room has the better view?”

I nodded and the man smiled, then he slapped a twenty-Euro note on the table and tucked it under the pack of cigarettes so it wouldn’t blow away. We didn’t say much in those fifteen minutes as we waited for 8 o’clock. He was looking at the sea with such admiration, and I was looking at him looking at the sea. I wondered what it meant to him and what warranted such an expression on his face; I considered asking him for a brief moment but decided I’d better not, that if it indeed meant something to him it was something I’d better not tamper with. Not now. Instead I turned and looked at it, too. I wasn’t sure I was seeing what he was seeing, but I wanted to forgive it for its betrayal.

It was four in the morning and I’d spent the last hours asleep, tenths of seconds at a time. To the buzz of a halogen lamp and a whiff of iodoform I scanned the room: Isabel was asleep, and so was the only other person I could see—a man in a fedora who’d put his feet up on the free seats next to him. I wandered down the stairs and past the automatic doors. On the main road a police siren was whirring its way westwards, the morning tang of seaweed as if wafting through alongside.

I went back up and snuck into Sara’s room again, this time curling next to her on the bed, stroking her hair and sharing the earbuds with her as Dylan’s *Sad-Eyed Lady* played, a song she liked—even more so since she’d heard it’d been written about someone named Sara. Through the

gap between the window and curtain I could see the opaque night still hanging over Nice, as Dylan sang about angels and Sara lay there on her back, my arm around her and my nose buried in her hair still smelling of citrus fruit shampoo the nurses had used. My arm would rise and fall with her breath, part of me grateful for any sign of movement, no matter how minuscule, and my eyelids sorrow-laden and bending a knee, my consciousness drifting off somewhere this had never happened.

No matter how long you've been asleep, or where, the first few seconds after you open your eyes can often lead to an unpredictable feeling, whether pulling you towards worry or peace sometimes just down to a subconscious whim—maybe just luck of the draw. It was the back of Sara's head I first saw when I opened my eyes, stirring a feeling inside me I couldn't put my finger on, like I'd never learnt how to exhale or something, not quite panic but heartbeat gunning it just the same, my mind certain my eyes and body were liars. And as I tilted my head she sputtered and moved the hair from in front of her face with a quick back-handed flick, her eyes half-open, vacillating between levels of consciousness, and me clenching her blanket and saying her name, voice cracking in and out of key, assuring her it was safe to wake up, her eyes a blizzard, scanning the space, shaking her head and saying how this wasn't her room, and me wrapping my arms around her, quelling what was left of those few seconds the best I could.

“Where've I been?” was the first thing she said.

“Here,” I said. “You've been here all along, baby.”

“Where's here?” she said.

I ran to the waiting room and gestured at Isabel, shaking her by the shoulder to wake her up, waving for her to come at once. Never in my life had something I'd said with or without words bestowed such effect on a face. Never will it have to again, I hope. Her cheeks flushed, she, too, forgetting how to use words, darting past me, pulling me by my hand as we hurried across the

slippery tiles of the corridor, sliding almost past the unit doorway, and she walked in first, she and Sara making eye contact as Isabel paused—and Isabel lunged towards the bed, embracing Sara in a squeeze, way too tight—like the way Sara would hug a cat before we'd tell her to be more gentle—and like a cat Sara's arms just hung by her side, her face a bewildered expression, Isabel unrelenting, unwilling to let her go.

Isabel finally pulled away. With her hands on Sara's shoulders and their noses almost touching, "Say something, dear," she said.

The dawn street noise sounded harmonious, magnificent.

"What do you want me to say?" Sara said, every word of it trundling.

As if admiring the words as they echoed, Isabel didn't say anything, like there'd never even been a question at all—just words with no real meaning, the prettiest ones she was ever going to hear.

When we finally flew back home, I was the only one of us awake, reading Air France's magazine, opening it mainly for the duty-free items but ending up on an article about a Stephen Hawking exhibition. I remembered how I had never had a chance to say goodbye to the man in the wheelchair, because I had never taken down his room number or seen him in front of the building again after that, but I was glad I had gone for those drinks with him. I felt sad I'd never had a chance to tell him about Sara, though. I was sure it would've made him smile. I put the magazine back in the slot in the seat in front of me and pulled my blanket up to my chest. I hadn't slept much at all in the last days—or even weeks—but the way Isabel and Sara were sleeping so peacefully next to me, I didn't even care I wasn't the one getting it. I tossed my headphones on and plugged the jack into the slot, picking the Clash's *Sadimista* on my phone. I was going to be there for a while and had never given that triple album a proper chance, even back when I was sixteen and they were all I

listened to. I looked out the window and thought how the earth looked so obviously round from there, then wondered if it was just an illusion because of the height and angle. The sun was perched, standing still, doing that trick it does where time doesn't exist between Europe and Montreal: you take off at noon, you land at noon. Sara started twitching, from a nightmare I assumed, so I wrapped her with my blanket; turning to my side I hugged her. With one eye open she looked out the window.

“Where are we?” she said.

I looked down at the immensity of the blue Atlantic and tilting my head I saw the lighter shade of shallower waters in the distance. The plane was less steady like it often is when it goes from over sea to over land, or over land to over sea, and I looked at my watch and saw we had been flying for four hours.

“Newfoundland,” I turned to Sara. “Almost in Newfoundland.”

We made it to Mile End in the mid-afternoon and got out of the taxi on St-Viateur. Turning the corner I felt that twang of familiarity: the kids playing ballhockey in the alleyway, yelling out *car* and moving the net every time one would come by; the smiles from leaving your house in nothing but a t-shirt after a long winter; the cops and hipsters queuing single file at Olimpico for an iced latté; starving artists; Duddy Kravitz in the flesh or maybe Mordecai in spirit; the violent summer sun and the sound of violins escaping third floor balconies; young mothers and fathers pushing strollers; faces I knew: writer, musician, sound engineer, junkie, label manager, dealer, panhandler, lawyer, yoga teacher, DJ, guy with the feathered hat, barman, mailman, conman.

When we made it back into our apartment, we put Sara to bed and for once she did not protest. I opened the window and as the afternoon sun peaked past the buildings and into the room, I lit us two cigarettes; I don't remember what we talked about but we were laughing for the first time in what felt like ages.

“I’ve been thinking,” Isabel said to me at one point. “I think we should get a cat. It’d be nice for Sara to have someone to play with.”

“Sure,” I said, “but we could also just get her a brother or sister.”

“You sure you would want that?” she said.

“I would.”

“I’d want that, too,” she smiled.

three.

Jay still hasn't shown up, which is starting to make me feel like I'm playing the lead in someone's adaptation of a Beckett play. And though I don't have the time on me, I have little doubt he's now officially late. I get up and traipse over to the bar to get my phone and notice for the first time that the flight attendants have left; a gentleman with a peaked cap is now sitting where they had been, drinking whiskey neat. He spots me and we make eye contact as I stand with an elbow on the bar and he pinches the brim of his cap as if about to doff it but in the end he lets it go. The bartender hands me my phone, and after I thank him I give the man in the cap a friendly nod but hurry back to my table before giving him the opening to start telling me his life story.

As I sit back down, I pour myself a glass and wait for my phone to turn on. Outside the snow is a thick haze—so much so that I start wondering about things like taxis to the airport and flight cancellations. Worst case scenario, I figure, I'll get a room upstairs and leave tomorrow morning. Something I'd wanted to avoid, but not the end of the world by any means.

The messages I've received all turn out to be from Sara. She's saying how her music teacher had briefly brought up assonance and dissonance that day in class, explaining these concepts as if they were something good or bad—pleasant or unpleasant. And apparently Sara argued this, raising the point of the medieval triton, then a CCR song and a Who song and even the Simpsons as examples to support her argument—that sometimes dissonance worked—and the teacher ended up saying OK, fine, yes, sometimes dissonance can be used in music, but it wasn't something *immediately* pleasant to the ear, to which Sara replied by asking why music should be immediately pleasant, anyway. Damn good question. The teacher was stumped, according to Sara. It baffles me, too. Not the question per se, but the fact Sara formulated this herself. I don't remember ever trying to explicitly explain to her what she was asking here, but somehow she gets it and can even express it into words.

I think about her question some more as I type a response: did music have a duty to be immediately pleasant? She, you, and I all know the answer—but I’m sitting here proud of the fact that a child her age can grasp this when everywhere around you people are trying to persuade you of the contrary. Asshole judges on every music talent show on TV, night after night, most of them something akin to a line cook from Arby’s judging a cooking show, on and on about pizzazz and starpower, perpetuating this idea that the more immediately pleasing something is, the better.

“Well, cherub,” I say as I take a sip of my wine. “Those judges are clearly no smarter than a child. My child, at least.”

For fuck’s sake, Jay—where are you? Your tardiness has me hobnobbing with angels and you know that can’t be a good thing. The cherub’s a good kid and all—a decent drinking companion if you’re the talkative type who requires a lot of listening—but I’m growing rather tired of his silence. I’m also beginning to think my stories aren’t having much of an effect on him—he’s giving me no reaction at all. Nothing! Come to think of it, Jay, this cherub may be some sort of psychopath. Hurry the fuck up.

The Devil’s Triton has seeped into my unconscious mind and it escapes back out in the form of hums. Hmm-mmm-*mmmmmmmmmmmm*.

“Sorry cherub,” I laugh to myself. “Forgive my oversight. I’m guessing you’re probably not a fan of that one. What with that name and all. Not to mention your house having that neverending East-Coast-West-Coast-type beef with the folks down below. I promise I won’t do it again. I’ll watch my mouth from now on.”

*

Things were different for Sara after France. Then again they were different for everyone. We had this cabin near Morin Heights just north of Montreal and it had a garden where we'd planted tulips before the frost and then watched bloom in spring. That summer, while Sara was away at camp, Isabel and I'd sit there in the sun, drinking sangria we'd made with slices of orange and lemon bought at the local farmers' market. She'd have her easel set up on the grass—or on the veranda when it rained—and would paint for hours on end, right up until the bus dropped Sara off in front of our driveway.

Along the yard's edge ran a winding brook. It would babble its way through pebble and sandstone while in the evening the three of us would sit looking over the slope, playing cards or music till it would get dark. Sara had shown such a knack for the piano. She could already move her way up and down the major scales in the 1-2-3-1-2-3-4-5 fingering I'd shown her, but whenever I'd hand her the ukulele, she'd try playing it with her head turned away from the frets, away from the neck, her eyes on the base of the instrument. That's how we first noticed there was something wrong with her right ear. Since the accident, that is.

As we waited for Sara to come back from camp one afternoon, I was walking out to the garden carrying a pitcher, and Isabel was there on her chair, sitting still with a foot up on a stool in front of her, the white linen of the canvas reflecting the bright afternoon light, and her staring right through it. She was biting down on the handle tip of her brush, as if lost in thought, her slender body in an oversized white tee, giving me a wink when she saw me appear. I always loved the way her smile was slightly asymmetrical at its most genuine. I put the pitcher down on the grass and sat back on the hickory long chair, noticing from up close the outlines she'd drawn to a fishing boat out at sea, rocked by waves under stormy skies, its sail sundered from its hull.

“I had a funny dream last night,” she turned to me and said. “I was a gladiator. In some kind of Roman coliseum. I fought off a dozen starving lions with a spear and the crowd went nuts. Then the guards dragged me over to the emperor’s balcony. And it was you sitting in the emperor’s seat.”

“Was I a merciful emperor?” I asked.

“*Pollice Verso*,” she said, turning her thumb down.

“I’m sure I had my reasons.”

As I read my paper, every now and then I’d peer over the page, observing her adding dark shades to the outlines on the canvas, and when I asked her why she was painting storms on such a gorgeous summer day, she shrugged and said she just wasn’t in a long blue sky or rolling hill kind of mood. She put her brush down and took a swig of her drink.

“And why would such a small fishing boat go so far out at sea?” I asked.

“Sometimes they just do that sort of thing, don’t they?” she turned and said.

The bus pulled over in front of our driveway and Sara came out clutching her lunchbox with both hands, running over to us in the yard, and Isabel, seeing her round the bushes, tossed her brush down on a rag that was laid out on the grass.

“Hello sweetie,” she said, wrapping her arms around Sara and kissing her on the forehead.

“How was your day?”

“Good,” Sara said.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Chased bugs.”

“Chased bugs?”

Sara nodded. “The other kids were playing Marco Polo in the pool,” she explained sitting down cross-legged on the grass. “But I told Dan I didn’t want to go in the pool. So he made me sit

on my towel while the other kids played. And there were lots of ants around and at first I was scared and ran away.”

“Sounds like the bugs were the ones chasing you.”

“Yes, but then I chased them,” she exclaimed with her index finger up at me. “And then the lifeguard blew her whistle and shouted at me. ‘*On ne court pas autour de la piscine!*’ So I stopped and just sat on the towel the whole time and it was really, really boring.”

“You didn’t want to swim, honey?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Way too dangerous,” she said.

We came back to the city the week before Labour Day so that Sara could start kindergarten. Isabel and I had initially wanted to delay her start by a year after what happened in France, but in the end the doctors convinced us it would be best for her to interact with other kids as soon as possible.

We walked her up the hill on her first day. Isabel had packed her a pastrami on rye with the crusts cut off, throwing in a pickle even though the smell would make her wretch. As we made our way up Sara held her umbrella against her collarbone, twirling it with both hands. She was skipping over every crack in the sidewalk, and when I asked her why she was doing that she answered that it was because were she to step on one of them, the world would almost certainly explode. When we reached the school, Sara stopped and gave her mother a hug, and then she walked away, down the path and through a door where a lady was standing welcoming new kids. She turned and waved before disappearing down the hallway.

As Isabel and I walked back down the hill that morning, we veered towards the park, past the pond and along the bike path towards home, the clouds overhead now dark and threatening more rain. By the time we sat under the awning outside a Greene Avenue café, it started pouring.

Isabel pointed to a new art gallery that had opened by the health spa across the street, saying how she'd have to stop in some time.

"You can go now if you want," I said. "I'll wait for you here."

She shook her head. "It's fine," she said. "I'll just go some other time." Sipping her coffee she was staring inside the café through the window, quiet for a while, and I asked her what she was thinking about and she said she was just wondering if this was what Westmount moms did all day, dropped their kids off at school and spent their nine to five on the avenue in Lululemons post hot yoga and brunch. She picked up an ashtray on the table, playing with it for a moment, fingering the notches on the rim, before putting it down on the next table over.

"I'm gonna turn into a Westmount housewife, aren't I?"

"We don't even live in Westmount," I said.

From inside her pocket her phone rang. She greeted her mom as I pulled a cigarette out from the pack in my coat, moving a few tables over before lighting it. Rain was driving down in squalls, thudding against a red Volkswagen parked on the street as the cloud of smoke I blew out scudded towards St. Catherine.

"How's Mom?" I asked when Isabel put the phone down.

"You know," she said. "Still asking the same old questions."

*

From the belvedere near the top of Murray Hill you can see most of Montreal. You can see the smokestacks by the Old Port and the flashing *Farine Five Roses* sign. You can see the Olympic village and the revolving beacon on top of Place Ville-Marie. You can see the Victoria Bridge perched over the St. Lawrence on limestone piers, there reminding you you're surrounded by water. On the other side you can see *Mont St. Hilaire* and on a clear day maybe even New York State.

You can also see the Canadian Pacific Railway lines and the Imperial Tobacco building in St. Henri. The Summit Circle mansions, with their twelve-foot doors and massive wrought-iron gates, are all around you, hidden in winding radial roads, but you cannot see them from the belvedere.

Sara was sitting between Isabel and me on the concrete railing wearing a white satin dress with floral patterns. Surrounded by trees turned scarlet and tangerine, we watched the sun as it hung behind the clouds like a giant silver coin; Sara and I'd for a moment even confused it for the moon. I pointed out the 720 to her and our house at the time, where we'd moved to from Mile End, just there on the other side.

A few weeks earlier, Sara's teacher, Miss Stevens, had asked us to come in after Sara kicked up a fuss over a school outing to the Westmount Y swimming pool.

"It's really unusual for Sara to act out," Miss Stevens had said to us. "I assured her there'd be lifeguards and swimming instructors at the pool, but it didn't help."

We explained to Miss Stevens about France and Sara's reluctance to swim since then and she agreed it would be best if Sara stayed home with us on pool days.

"Truth is," I said to Sara that day on the belvedere as thunderclouds loomed over the south shore. "Look around—we live on land. Nobody really needs to know how to swim—unless they're a fish or something. As long as you don't feel like you're missing out on something you love, you can

go through life without setting foot in so much as a wading pool for all I care. We just wouldn't want fear to stop you from doing the things you really love."

Sara was distracted by raccoons rummaging for food in the nearby garbage bins on a patch of grass just below us. One of them was face down in the can, hanging by his hind legs, his ass sticking out. As he rocked the bin it tipped over and trash came rolling out onto the grass. He and his pal then fought over a piece of bread crust. Sara laughed. Then she looked past the raccoons, squinting in the direction of the church on the corner of Clarke, straight ahead down the hill.

"Is that the church we're going to today?" she asked.

"That's the one," Isabel said.

I wasn't exactly reconciled with the Church by the time Sara was christened at St. Leo's in Westmount, just a few blocks from where I'd grown up, but Isabel wanted to make her own mother happy after the ordeal in France. And so goes compromise.

There's just something about being inside a place of worship that I'd always found so unsettling. It was like I'd always been an imposter there, since the first time I'd set foot in one, tracking my mud all over the damn floor, and St. Peter standing on his rock, so carefully pervious to light, the thought he'd one day strike me down inescapable. Or at least he'd be around when it happened.

The moment it was over I excused myself and stepped outside, where I sat down on the church steps, lighting a cigarette, staring at a construction site by a Clarke Avenue condo building. As a kid I'd sometimes go down to Stayner Park just around the corner from there to play basketball with the kids from the Burgundy projects, and there were times I'd venture past instead, down the hill to St. Henri, and just wander around and stare at the guitars hanging from pawn shop windows on Notre-Dame. There were a few times I even got lost, but too shy to ask for directions in a working-class Québécois neighbourhood, I'd look for the cross on top of Mount-Royal to find my

way home. But the cross can't be even be seen from anywhere south of what was then Dorchester. I once ended up crossing the canal into Point St. Charles without even realizing, and I noticed how the street names changed, from Rue Notre-Dame and Rue Charlevoix, to Grand Trunk, Liverpool, Coleraine, Dublin. I still couldn't see the cross on top of the mountain. And as it got dark I couldn't even see the hill anymore and had to ask a cop how to get back to Atwater Station. His badge said O' Riley but he spoke French to me—and he ended up offering me a ride up the hill. As he turned the corner I could see the Greene Avenue wind tunnel leading all the way up to the Summit mansions. Instead of taking me to my house, he dropped me off there on the corner, and waited in his patrol car until I made it through my door.

I was still too young to understand it then, but Montreal wasn't Canada, and it wasn't Quebec either. It was always its own thing.

An island in the middle of it all.

Drifting.

It was St. Catherine West but *Ste. Catherine Est*. It was crossing train tracks and feeling the language change. It was everyone rooting for the same hockey team and looting the Foot Locker downtown during the playoffs whether they had won or lost. It was the seedy neon rub-n-tug signs switching on when the bars spilled out onto the streets at 3am. It was Sunday nights dropping acid with the squeegees in Berri Square and it was puking bile in the frozen Jeanne-Mance wading pool in the morning, as the sky over you went from black to arctic blue, and your hands shaking, halfway between hypothermia and delirium tremens. It was broken bottles crackling underfoot on St. Patrick's Day. Louis Cyr pushing freight cars and Mary Gallagher looking for her severed head in Griffintown. It was without a doubt Susan Kennedy's bloodied axe. It was the fleur-de-lys and the Rose of Lancaster, the shamrock and the thistle. It was the Hassidics in Mile-End returning from Shabbat prayers with Torahs under their arms. It was knowing *N'ap Boule* was the only answer to

Sak pase?, and old faded 7UP signs above the depts before they were replaced by convenience store chains.

It was the French and the English, the Golden Square Mile perched a half-mile above the slums, the Jews and Catholics, and at the same time it was none of these things. It was defending any side you witnessed under attack. It was saying fuck the English whenever they pretended this was Ontario. It was saying fuck the French when they thought anyone gave a damn about their protest. It was saying fuck the Catholics for sticking crosses on all the highest points. It was saying fuck Jean-de-Brébeuf, whatever he did, and the other Jesuits, too. It was saying fuck the Jews for giving the Catholics something *ostentations* to wear around their necks. It was saying fuck the language laws of the O.Q.L.F., and most of all, fuck anyone you ever heard saying they'd be out of here if the separatists ever won.

Isabel came out the church's front door holding Sara by the hand as I sat on the steps, a newly lit cigarette burning between my fingers.

"What got into you?" she asked.

"Divine fuckin' intervention," I said.

"Divine intervention," she rolled her eyes. "That's rich." She leaned over to the side of Sara's good ear. I sometimes wondered if Sara's right ear was God's way of sticking it to me, for something I'd done—or maybe hadn't done—but we had to count our blessings, all things considered.

"Come on," Isabel said to Sara, offering her hand. "Let's get you some lunch."

*

On a night not unlike this one—seasonal differences notwithstanding—I sat on the patio of a Bernard Street bar where—there too—I waited for Jay. When he finally appeared, donning a flat cap hat and his hair curling around his ears like a sickle, longer than I’d ever seen it on him, what immediately struck me as different about him had more to do with his demeanour than any physical or sartorial attribute. That isn’t to say his eyes didn’t betray the glassy stare and generalized world-weariness that usually came with sleep deprivation, but his gait, more assertive and resolute than usual, seemed to suggest that the lack of sleep was at least not without some kind of purpose to it.

“Sporting the latest and greatest in proletariat revolution-wear, I see?” I said to him as he pulled himself a seat.

“This old thing?” he replied. “This is nothing. You should see the coat I found at the thrift store the other day. Perfect for skinning Romanovs and long walks by the Volga.”

When he asked the waitress for a beer, I noticed that even his voice sounded at least a few semitones sharp, the way voices tend to sound after an all-nighter, or several of them back to back.

“How’s Sara?” Jay asked. “How’s school going?”

“Good,” I nodded. “She’s getting back to her old self, for the most part.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said with three knocks on the wooden table. “Real good to hear.”

“Still refuses to set foot in any body of water, though.”

“Give the kid some time,” he said. “A day’ll come where she’ll have forgotten all about this.”

“I haven’t seen you around the studio lately,” I said. “What have you been up to?”

“You know how it is...” he shrugged. “There’s just not much there for me to do right now. So I’ve just been kind of hanging out at home.”

“Doing what?” I asked.

“You know,” he said arms aloft. “Things.”

When his beer arrived, Jay raised it in an arched motion like if he were about to lob it backwards, the way one would’ve perhaps proposed a toast in a medieval banquet. And as much as I prodded Jay about what he’d been up to, whether he had any projects lined up, he would avoid the question every time, always flipping the subject back to me or some triviality like the weather or baseball—which he didn’t even follow.

I pointed to his glass, which at that point was more empty than full. “Another beer?”

He rocked his head side to side in consideration for a moment, his lip finally giving way to a one-sided snarl. Putting index to thumb in a pantomime puff, “How about we go for a *walk* instead?” he said.

“Whatever you like.”

So we finished our beers and walked along the Mile End train tracks below the overpass, then we hit a park, and from his coat pocket Jay produced a box with a leather cover that matched the bark of trees. Our syncopated footfalls the only sound in the vicinity, we reached a playground at the end of a path. A swing set, incandescent in the scrim of sodium light, with its golden beams and inverted U posts, cast its shadow on a graffitied wall; and on that wall a girl with braids stood hipshot with a boombox on her shoulder, surrounded by eighth notes and G clefs, pursing her lips as if whistling along to the tune playing.

As I sat down on one of the swings Jay opened the box and started rolling a joint.

“This stuff is the bomb,” he said.

“The stuff you grow yourself?”

He shook his head. “Some M-39 I bought off Skinny Zonk.”

“Skinny Zonk deals weed now?”

“Skinny Zonk deals everything now,” he said. “Ever since Drumz did his stint at Bordeaux he’s been on the straight and narrow. And so Zonk took over.”

“Drumz got locked up for dealing? I really have been out of the loop.”

“Not even for dealing, man,” he said licking the edge of his Rizla. “He got busted trying to lift a lawnmower from Canadian Tire in broad daylight.”

“Actually?”

“Dead serious,” Jay said. “Shirtless, high as fuck, he walked up to the store one morning and stole it right there out of the parking lot display. The worst part is the guy lives on the seventh floor of a building with no fuckin’ yard. He boosted it just cause he wanted a ride home after a night of bingeing.”

“It was a ride-on mower?”

Sticking a match down his joint, “He hotwired a John Deere,” Jay looked up and said. “Worst getaway imaginable, right? Other than maybe a fucking Zamboni. And instead of pulling off onto a sidestreet, this genius tries his luck on the Main and gets nabbed three blocks later.”

“How on earth did I miss this?”

“Don’t know,” he shrugged. “It was in every paper.” He moistened the tip of the joint with his mouth and lit it before taking three quick draws and passing it to me. “Some guys just have the knack for going viral, I guess,” he said. “Sometimes for all the wrong reasons.”

When I passed the joint back to him I propelled myself backwards on the swing, a mini sandbloom rising from my feet while somewhere off the Main red and blue lights whirled.

A long pause ensued as Jay’s head followed the lights as they faded.

“I was thinking...” he then said to break the silence. “You know those pants the cops wear?”

The cops in Montreal had been protesting on and off for years, but since the police force couldn't just declare a unilateral strike, the officers would instead protest by wearing the most ridiculous pants they could find. Anything from camo, to leopard-skin, to tight leather.

"We talking about the neon army pants?" I said to Jay. "Hard to miss. They stick out like a fuckin' sore thumb. How long have they even been protesting now, anyway? It feels like at least a decade. To be honest, I don't even remember them ever wearing *normal* pants."

"That's kind of my point," he said. "Imagine a guy in hot pink army pants pulls you over. Gives you a ticket for, say, going 70 in a 50 zone, you'd probably still keep a straight face, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose I would."

"You wouldn't even notice the pants?"

"Entirely possible," I said. "Even more so if one of us is driving a John Deere in this scenario."

"How fucked up is that?"

"What's so fucked up about it?"

"Not sure how to explain it. Like, yesterday I saw this granny totally t-bone a van driven by a Hassidic man. On the corner of Bernard and Park. A French woman. Entirely her fault, for the record. But she comes out guns blazing. Then she starts giving the other driver an earful and he comes out of his car at this point. And they're yelling at each other back and forth and witnesses are stepping up, and getting involved, getting in shouting matches with other witnesses. All this in the middle of the fuckin' intersection. I'm watching this scene unfold—so are fifty other people give or take—an absolute shitshow! And then a cop car pulls up. One of the officers comes out. Something like 6'3, easily 50 pounds overweight. Wearing that red baseball cap. And neon pink camo pants! Well, *camo*, so to speak, right? And he runs right into the middle of the commotion and starts telling

people to go back to their cars or the street or whatever, pointing furiously to the curb while both drivers fight to get a word in over him. At this point it's like something halfway between a renaissance painting and a Fellini movie. I can't take my eyes off it. But the thing I find most fascinating is that not a single person there appears to even acknowledge the pants! They interact with the cop as if this is somehow normal behaviour rather than something totally fucking absurd. And then when his partner, who'd mind you look far more ridiculous in this shot were she there on her own, fills out a report while he goes around asking who saw what happened. And he's coming round my way as I'm lighting a dart and at that point I'm thinking, holy fuck, if he says a single word to me I won't be able to think about anything else but the pants, and I'll probably piss my own laughing."

"This is what's been on your mind, Jay?" I said.

"Huh?"

"The reason you've been so quiet all night? Is this what you've been thinking about?"

Shaking his head, "No—of course not."

"So what did you do?"

"I had no other choice. I got the hell out of there."

"Reasonable."

"..."

"..."

"So you don't know how it ended?"

"How what ended?"

"Filthy-mouth gran versus the Hassidic?"

"No clue," he said. "But the ending isn't the point."

"So there's a point?" I let out a laugh.

“Of course there is,” he said. “Like, I’m saying you get too close to something for a long period of time, you stop seeing things as they really are. Even when they so look so blatantly out of place. You end up getting tunnel vision.”

“I see.”

“Don’t you ever feel like…” he continued after a pause, “that shit can only happen here? I mean, anywhere else, someone would point and say, ‘Hey look, that guy is wearing ridiculous pants?’ That’s all I want to see happen. Is that really too much to ask?”

“So why didn’t you do it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah—I guess you’re right. From now on, I will. I’ll call them out on this sort of stuff.”

“Great,” I said. “This will end well.”

“I’ll be sure to call them out in French.” He stood up and pointed to the street with his chin as if to say we should be on our way. “Of course,” he added, “that would mean I’d first have to learn the damn language.”

*

At the time Clara Spencer came to Montreal to make her sophomore album at Park Lane, she could still—to some extent—enjoy the anonymity that would soon after no longer be available to her. Her debut had been well-received, both critically and commercially, but it wouldn't be until the record we'd make together that she'd really blow up on the international stage. She'd married music tycoon Clay Brooks—the same Clay Brooks who sat with us at the Island yacht party—in a lavish Honolulu ceremony the previous summer, and it was actually Clay, I'd find out later, who'd suggested Clara make her record with me in the first place.

She walked into the lobby that morning in a snow leopard coat, her strawberry blonde hair down past her shoulders, and when she introduced herself she spoke in a voice as airy and subdued as the one you'd hear on her songs, as if doing so in character. As she and I waited for the rest of her band to arrive I showed her around the studio, and when we walked past the Jenn Blake plaque mounted on the hallway wall—the only one of those I'd ever put up—she mentioned how the vinyl was still a staple on her record player at home.

“There's just something about that voice,” she said. “Somehow uplifting and haunting in the same breath... What's she doing these days anyway? She sort of fell off the grid after that Streams record...”

“I couldn't tell you,” I said. “It's been ages since I've heard from her.”

What with all that happened in France, I never ended up recording the Streams' album like I was meant to. Jenn's insistence on working with me again eventually subsided and they recorded it in Toronto with Bruno Burns instead, and when it came out the reviews were too mediocre for anyone to notice it'd ever even existed. Overproduction can still kill a record even on analogue tape, contrary to what some believe.

“Shame,” Clara said. “I was always hoping to see the two of you make an album together again.” She sat down at the piano and hit the same major 7th chord in three different octaves. “Very nice,” she said as the notes rang out, as if following the path of their resonance with her eyes, nodding her head in approval.

Clara spent a month or so in town. When I first introduced her to Isabel, I felt as though I’d reunited best friends. Their banter was the stuff of old movies. Clara, too, had lost her father in a traffic accident, though much younger in her case, and she’d also spent part of her teens in New York before moving back to her native San Francisco to study music. Sometimes the three of us would go out for drinks in Old Montreal, and there were times Clara would come round the house for dinner, on occasion even spending the night in our guestroom. She seemed to like Isabel’s paintings, taking a genuine interest in them, namedropping agents and art dealers she knew in New York or L.A. or Paris who could help get the paintings *out there*, names that meant nothing to me but had Isabel nodding.

She made even more of an impression on Sara, who’d always ask for Clara to tell her stories when she’d be around come bedtime. Somehow Clara even succeeded in getting Sara to go to her hotel’s swimming pool with her.

“How did you do that?” Isabel asked.

“I just told her I was going swimming,” Clara said. “Sara asked if she could tag along and I said sure.”

“And she actually went in the pool?”

“Swam like a bleepin’ dolphin,” Clara nodded.

“Unbelievable.”

Towards the end of the tracking, I decided I’d try reaching out to Jenn to see if she’d come sing some backing vocals on Clara’s record. I figured it would make Clara happy, and it was a good

excuse to get Jenn in a recording studio, too, though I figured Jenn would no doubt take some convincing. I'm not sure why I'd even thought that. I was way off—when I called, it was almost as though she'd been sitting by the phone just waiting for something like this to come up.

A few days later, Jenn took the train from Toronto and was in the studio singing on *Canon of the Bay*. Clara and I watched from the control room as Jenn's falsetto hovered over the recording of Clara's dropped, near-spoken, contralto, and Clara turned to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Some people just have that golden touch, don't they?" she said.

"She's a natural."

Jenn stuck around after Clara went home that day, and I got us a six-pack out from the fridge and we sat on the couch in the lobby catching up. I told her how sorry I felt for what had happened to their record.

"As if that's on you in the least bit," Jenn said.

"I know," I said. "I just wish it could've somehow gone down differently for you."

"Thanks. You and me both."

"In any case, I appreciate you coming down today."

"Clara's a nice girl," she nodded. "Really not the pop princess I'd had her pegged for." She popped the cap off a bottle before taking a swig from it. "Still, something odd about her, no?"

"Odd how?" I asked.

"I can't really put my finger on it," she said. "It's like she really enjoys the sound of her own voice—sometimes a little too much."

I laughed. "Isn't that just every singer?"

"No way," she shook her head. "Self-doubt usually gets in the way. For most of us at least. Or maybe I'm just jealous."

I asked her about new material from her and the Streams and she shrugged and said she had enough songs for three or four triple albums, but that since the last one bombed the label was making her jump through hoops before letting her put another one out.

“One day they’re saying one thing, the next they’re saying the complete opposite. I’m still under contract, but they won’t let us record a damn thing. They refuse to drop the contract, though. It’s like they want to get back at me for releasing a flop by not only trying to avoid forking over a single dime, but also not letting me release any music anywhere. Total fuckin’ stalemate. Such babies.”

“Your own *Darkness* moment.”

“Something like that,” she said.

“So what you going to do?” I asked.

“What can I do?” she said. “Be patient, I guess. Wait it out and hope it gets resolved.”

“Somehow I feel like we’ve been here before,” I said.

“You want me to come and record overnight again?” she laughed. “Is that what you’re suggesting? Getting lightning to strike twice like that is a fool’s errand.”

“You gotta do something.”

“Who says I do?” she shrugged. “Maybe I’ve, you know, said everything I’ve had to say. Done everything I’ve had to do.”

“Nonsense.”

“Why’s that nonsense?”

“Because I can see you itching in your seat.”

“What kind of itch you seeing?”

“You know, that modest demeanor you see in people on the verge of doing something great. They’re itching to get something out of their system and out into the open.”

“How can you possibly see that?”

“For starters, you’re the most talented artist I’ve ever worked with it, and you say you’ve written a dozen albums’ worth of material, and you haven’t once bragged about anything in there. Either it’s really shit, or you’ve come up with something special.”

“What if it’s the former?”

“So your last record bombed—it happens! Don’t let it get in the way of what you’re doing now. You can’t let critics make you scared of failing.”

“Who says I’m scared of failing?” Jenn said. “I don’t really give a shit what Pitchfork has to say. Sure—I don’t want to repeat myself. I don’t want to make an average record, either. A fear of mediocrity, or of another record going unnoticed, maybe. Not a fear of *failing*.”

“Is there a difference? Isn’t mediocrity just another word for failure? Especially for someone of your talent?”

“I suppose...” she said throwing her arms aloft. “In any case, it’s all out of my hands right now.”

“Well, maybe it isn’t. Also, I owe you.”

“Please—you don’t owe me shit.”

“We’ll find a way to make your record,” I said. “When you’re ready.”

“If you say so,” she said.

The bump hadn’t yet started to show by the time we walked Sara up for her first day of school in the new year. The tracking for Clara’s record had all been done before she’d left back to L.A., and though I told her she didn’t have to be there for the mixing, she insisted on coming back and being there for it.

“I want to see the songs, you know, come to life,” she’d said to me over the phone. “And besides, it gives me an excuse to come back and visit you guys.”

On the last day of mixing it was just her and me in the studio. I set the monitors up in the live room and told Clara we could give the album a few more listens, to see how it sounded in a larger space before signing off on it. I popped open the remaining bottle of champagne from my stash and brought out two glasses and we sat in the middle of the live room, listening to her record from top to bottom. Propped up on an elbow she lay on her side, in a long-sleeved white tee and black leather pants, her eyes closed for most of it. Once in a while she’d open them and have a sip of her champagne, and when she’d catch my glance she would smile, then have another sip and close her eyes again. When the last note of the last song rang out, she looked over at me.

“I’m good with that,” she said with a nod. “But if we have time for one more listen,” she added. “Maybe we could try making a small change in the sequencing? Just to be certain this is the one?”

“Sure,” I said, and as I headed to the control room to cue the changes I poured us the last of the champagne, which by then was warm, and I told Clara I’d run to the store and get another before we gave the album one last listen. My ears needed a break if they were going to be of any use anyway.

“Can you do me a favour?” Clara followed me to the control room. “Could you leave *Canon of the Bay* on loop before you go?”

On my walk back from the liquor store I remembered that somewhere in the basement I had a bucket we could use to fill with ice and keep the champagne cold. That basement I used mainly as a storage room—for spare amps and instruments and what not—but it was also where the security monitors were, in their separate little cove. I went down the staircase and switched on the lights, and as I scrambled around the room looking for the bucket I saw Clara on the security monitor, supine

on the couch in the control room, and despite the pixelization of the camera it was clear her arm was reaching down, her hand disappearing between her legs. Her pants clearly undone. Could Jenn have been right about her? Could someone really be turned on by the sound of their of own singing voice? To that point? There was no way, was there? Surely Jenn had just put that in my head and this was some weird coincidence?

I wasn't sure what to do. I gave up on the bucket after that; instead I went upstairs to the lobby and filled a salad bowl with ice and waited a few minutes before entering the studio again, figuring that the light that flashed when the door was opened would at least alert her of my presence. She was walking back into the live room just as I came in, *Canon of the Bay* still playing out of the speakers; I went to the control room and cued the album from the top and we listened to it and drank the second bottle of champagne like nothing had ever happened. Neither of us ever brought it up. To each other at least.

And that night all four of us went out for dinner in Old Montreal, Clara and I going through two bottles of Pinot before ordering a third we did not finish, Isabel sticking to Perrier and lemon. The morning after that, when Clara left for the airport, she said goodbye to Sara, promising her she'd be back in town before the stork, and though she would in the end keep her promise, it was only because the stork would never show.

*

Meanwhile, the Streams were getting dropped by their label. No matter how often Jenn would say otherwise, I still felt like I owed her something, so I stepped in and offered to donate the studio time to make their record. This way Malware could at least cut their risks. But it wasn't enough to convince them. Years had gone by since Jenn and the band had a buzz, and that second album's flop was just as much on my head as far as the label was concerned. My word didn't mean a thing to them at that point.

So I told them I'd make the record anyway and show it to them when it was done and they could decide there and then if they wanted it or not. Otherwise we'd find somewhere else to release it. Shitty deal for us—me especially—but it was all we had.

The band sent me demos they'd recorded on a Tascam 4-track in Dave's basement. The tape hissed and screeched something awful but the songs were enough to work with. Then Dave called me one night and gave me his spiel about how after the last album's 4.8 on Pitchfork they wanted to get with the times and try something new, like for instance, record this one on Pro Tools. As if analogue tape itself was responsible for their last record being shit, more so than even Bruno Burns.

Of course, my studio offered both options, mostly as a matter of compromise, but I'd still rarely touch any of the digital toys until the final mix. Had it been anyone else, I'd have agreed, but not with the Streams, especially not then with everything there was at stake. I realized we maybe had two different records in mind. In that way, as an engineer, I'd failed them before we'd even started recording; but as a producer I had to talk them into changing their minds.

It wasn't ever even just about the sound itself. I'd worked with hundreds of artists and bands, many of who were always up for doing another take, convinced they can do better after every playback. Truth is most times they can't. Not because they're bad musicians—the limitations

sometimes come from somewhere else. When Jenn would sing or play you wouldn't need very many takes either, because after a few you'd end up with something impossible to recreate. Not because she was technically perfect either—far from it. Imperfections are what make great records and performers. With someone like the Illegal Streams, you set up microphones in the right places, press the record button and only interfere if you absolutely must. Any other detail you can worry about later. Half your job is knowing when to stop. Listening to the band play I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time—since I'd last been in a band myself. Or more like it was something I didn't even know I'd ever felt because I'd never put my finger on it long enough for it to surface when it was there. It wasn't about the music they made, it was about something between them. The way they joked around. The way they were so familiar with each other's quirks. How they knew each other's prescription schedules off by heart. Or the way they laughed when they told that story about getting stuck in Winnipeg when their van died at a red light on the corner of Portage and Main; the way they had to point out to you, in unison, how Portage and Main was the coldest intersection in the ten provinces. You often hear recovering AAs and NAs say how, in hindsight, what they miss most about their so-called heydays has more to do with the lost camaraderie than the actual substance of choice itself. When you're in your late twenties and suddenly go from being in a band to not being in one, when it's pretty much all you've known your entire life, how do you fill a void most have learned to suppress since the day they left high school? Drinking anything you can, snorting anything you can, fucking anything you can will only get you so far. So do you give being an actual grown-up a shot? Work a real job where bonding with co-workers most likely won't involve 2am beers in a roadside motel after a hard day's work? Start a label or become a concert promoter. Work in a record store. Deliver drugs on a bicycle and be seasonally unemployed from November to April unless you're willing to risk your neck on icy Montreal streets. Off yourself or make a solo record. Abandon that solo record midway because for some reason you can't figure out you're not getting

the same kick out of it. Go back to school and postpone the void another three years. Go to cooking school and become a chef. Spend time with your folks. Try and truly love something, or someone. Walk down the aisle, have kids, walk your way back up that aisle with only half your future income. Spend time with your pet.

I'd gone to this abandoned loft in Mile End after coming back from tour—this just a few weeks before I met Isabel— in this large warehouse by the viaduct, and I looked around, at all that coked-out glee, and I couldn't help but wonder what was going happen to these people once all this ended. Surely this couldn't go on forever? Where would they all go? A few weeks later I decided I'd find out for myself, and in many ways I was luckier than most, but some of it I inevitably still miss to this day.

And so I worked on those Streams songs like they were my own. Once the bulk of the tracking was done, I'd spend entire nights at the studio, just me, and I'd pick up an instrument I thought was missing, hit record in the control room and run down to the other side of the glass and try a take myself. There's something special about the way a guitar, or trumpet, played loud in the middle of the night resonates when there's no else around to hear it. At least I've always thought so.

One morning I came home to take Sara to school and Isabel was sitting in the living room in her dressing gown, and she told me how Clara had called the previous night, how she'd invited us to come visit her in California for the upcoming break, before Isabel got *too* pregnant. Isabel wanted to take Sara down there a week or two early since I was spending all my time at the studio and suggested I meet them there once the album was done. The following week, the two of them were already in L.A..

And as it got closer to being finished I'd play the album from the top over and over again, looking for something to add, or something to scrap, anything to make it flow better. The Streams knew they had a good record in the works, but what I played them blew away their expectations.

Their manager, Tony, came down to the studio to hear it one night, and afterwards he took us out for drinks in a bar on Bernard, where he asked me again and again when he'd get a copy to show around. I told him he had to be patient.

"I have no problem being patient," he said. "It's the label I'm worried about."

"What about the label?" I said.

Tony laughed. If Malware didn't want the record, any other label would be happy to release it. And surely even Malware weren't assholes enough to prevent a record this good from coming out.

"Tell you what," I said. "We won't mix it and pass it around just yet. I'll get on that when I get back from California. But if you want to invite someone down to listen to the material, then by all means..."

A few days later Tony came down to the studio with Ray, an A&R from Malware who he'd personally flown in from New York after what took a lot of convincing. The whole band was there, too, sitting on the floor of the control room when Tony arrived with Ray. The entire couch to himself, Ray sat in the middle, his head down, silent and his eyes closed for the entire thing. Jenn kept looking his way for any sign or reaction. The fucker was probably laughing inside, realizing he had what was the best album of its genre of the last decade in his hands, with first dibs on it, and without ever even having to fork over a single dime for its production.

As the last song I played for him faded out Ray raised his head and opened his eyes. Ray wasn't a major label guy but he was still without a doubt a dick. He paused, as if to add suspense and weight to what he would say next. "Some good stuff here," he finally said, nodding to himself. "A few songs running too long, but that's nothing we can't fix. I think we might be able to work something out."

Tony was smart, though. He insisted we go out that night, keeping the drinks coming till Ray's brain floated in Chivas, Tony meanwhile sipping the same double whiskey stretched on ice throughout; and the less Ray did to hide his enthusiasm, the more Tony could tell what the record was worth to him. The band went home and the three of us stayed, the only customers in the place, and not long after that Tony had a look at his watch and decided it was time for him to go.

As Tony got up, Ray thanked him for the drinks. "This record," he said. "Best thing I've heard in a long, *long* time. I can't wait to put it out there."

Tony shook his hand and as he reached for the door he pulled a one-eighty, something straight out of Columbo, pausing, wagging his finger up in the air as if he'd just remembered something he'd been meaning to say. "I'm glad you think so, Ray," he said. "I really am." Then, after a pause, "It's just such a shame you guys voided the contract." And then Tony was out the door.

Ray turned to me and let out a nervous chuckle. "He's joking, right?"

"Relax," I said. "I'm sure he is."

But I could tell by Ray's expression that he realized there and then this album would end up costing him way more than he'd thought—or possibly costing him his job if it landed somewhere else.

"I should turn in, too," he said before running off through the door and after Tony.

As I took my drink and sat down at the bar, snow was falling outside, orange in the glow of sodium light. The bartender, staring out the window, sighed.

"Snow again," she said. "We're almost in May for chrissake."

"This kind never lasts," I tried to reassure her. "It'll be gone by morning. And besides..."

"I know you," she cut me off.

And as the song that played through the speakers ended she ran over to her laptop at the back of the bar, and it then cut to a synth-pop track with an 80s disco beat and strident hi-hat.

Clearly recorded in someone's basement. Decent vocals, though, I thought, tapping my fingers on the bar to the beat.

"Do you know this band?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"They're called *The Poachers*," she said, fetching the bottle of whiskey and filling my glass without me having asked. "My roommate Chris plays drums for them."

I nodded. "Cool."

"What do you think?"

"I think they could learn a thing or two about EQ," I said. "The song's not bad, though."

"They're playing a show at Casa this Thursday," she said handing me a flyer. "You should check them out."

I thanked her for the flyer and downed my drink, then went out the door and made my way down St. Urbain. I was ready to walk the hour or so it took to get home from there, but there on a whim I swung by Casa to see if anyone was playing. I just never went to gigs anymore, I thought.

"Anyone still up?" I asked the kid at the door.

"Two more bands," he said. "Ten bucks."

I handed him a ten and got a drink at the bar while a lanky guy with a moptop moved a Vox AC-30 onto the stage and a sound guy about the same age as the band positioned an SM57 mic in front of it. Why did bands still feel the need to mic their amps in venues no bigger than their bedrooms? Talk about overkill.

It took a while before they came on. Propped up on an elbow at the bar I read through my emails and saw that Clara's album, which had been released the previous week, had sold 45,000 copies since, and was going straight to number one in the U.S.. Number one with 45,000! I couldn't

believe it. Twenty years earlier you'd have needed ten times that amount to even have a shot at the top five. 45,000 would've maybe let you crack the top 20.

There were about twenty or thirty people in the room when the band walked on stage, most of them about the same age as the band members—early to mid-twenties—if even that. The guitar hit the unceremonious pair of A notes that seem to precede every gig, everywhere, and then four stick-taps led them into the first song. Gloomy post-punk kind of stuff. They were OK, but not nearly as good as they thought.

After seven or eight songs they walked off stage, and while the others in his band unloaded gear the singer came to the bar and traded a coupon for a drink.

“Nice set,” I said to him.

He responded with a jaded sort of *thanks* before taking his drink and traipsing off to the stage to help his bandmates unload. I laughed at the idea that he was probably thinking to himself that there must be something wrong with his music if some dude in his thirties standing on his own at the bar enjoyed it. I knew I probably would have—that was like your folks enjoying the music you made. But later the same kid was talking to the boy doing the door, and both of them were casting these furtive looks my way just as the next band was getting ready to go on, and the kid walked back over with his EP in hand and thanked me for coming to the show. He told me all about how they'd done it in his basement, on an analogue 8-track machine, and how he thought I'd appreciate that. He also talked about how much he dug those first two Bells of Passion records before they went too mainstream, and how everything they'd done since was shit in his opinion. He then invited me to a party at his drummer's place should I wish to join them after the show, and I said I didn't think so *but—you know—thanks*—and I turned to listen to the band that'd started playing, which so far sounded quite a lot like the first.

Maybe it was because there was no one there—at home that is—but I didn't want to go home once the set was done. And so I ended up tagging along to Dan the drummer's semi-basement one-bedroom, where about a dozen of us sat cross-legged on a faded rug drinking cans of lukewarm PBR as Godspeed's latest LP played from the corner of the room. Within ten minutes I'd been given demos and was holding court, fielding questions on touring and home recording. The guy who did sound at the show wanted to know how I managed to make drums sound so huge. How I got that Phil Spector kind of wall of sound. Another girl wanted to know if the Bells of Passions were assholes in real life like everyone said they were. And this other kid flat out asked me if I'd ever *boned* Clara Spencer. I just said she was a close friend. My answer disappointed him, though, and I even broke his heart a second time when I said no to a line of blow he'd put in front of me.

Dan, the guy who lived there, handed me an acoustic guitar at one point and asked if I still played. I took the guitar from his hands and strummed a few open chords as people picked up instruments strewn across the room and joined in. Given the din and the time of night, it came as no real surprise when the guy living just above came knocking, threatening to call the cops if we didn't stop the racket.

To this day I'm not sure why, but I told them all I could take them some place where they could make all the noise they wanted, where there weren't any neighbours to worry about, and so we walked up to the studio. I even let them try the instruments in the live room as long as they kept their hands off anything in the control room. Some of them jammed, others just sat in the control room drinking beer, their jaws down and their eyes wide as they recognized names on the boxes of tape reels. This one kid took a picture of himself in front of the tapes, saying how his friends would never believe he'd been there otherwise; then he took another with me, saying his friends would believe that even less.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you’re like a ghost, man.”

“A ghost?” I laughed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Or some kind of presence. It’s like, everyone around here knows who you are and know you’re around but nobody ever sees you anymore. At, like, shows and festivals and stuff. Or even just walking down the street.”

The kids started rolling out not long after that, one by one, and once they were all gone I locked up after them, spending the night on the control room couch.

In the meantime, Tony had walked away from the Malware deal and he’d even started shopping the idea around to a few other labels, without actually letting them hear anything but the promo single, the only thing I’d cut a mix of, but eventually Malware agreed to his terms. The day before I left for California, Tony called and asked me to meet him in a coffee shop, and after a short briefing on where we stood with the album release he handed me a cheque for \$20,000.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“I got them to retroactively pay for part of the production,” Tony said. “Now—I know this probably doesn’t cover all the time you spent on this, but it’s something, right?”

“You really didn’t have to do this.”

He presented his open palm. “It’s a matter of principle,” he said.

I thanked Tony and told him how impressed I’d been by the way he’d handled the whole situation. He got up and reached for the bill but I pushed his hand away.

“Come on,” I said. “I’m still walking away from this meeting almost 20k richer.”

He laughed. “Call me when you get back from California.” he said.

As he walked out of the café, I threw a bill on the table and had another look at the cheque before folding it in two and tucking it in my wallet. It would stay there untouched for months. Not

out of principle of course. I was more than happy to take Malware's money. I would just never get around to doing it before leaving for California.

*

Clara's house in Malibu had this long wooden deck from where you could skip a pebble right into the Pacific. The sun hadn't yet come up when I stepped outside that first morning. And lowering myself into a long chair I wrapped my arms around my shins and stared out at the ocean swells, observing how they moved, rocking from Laguna Point towards the Santa Monica pier, where the momentum finally gave them the nudge to complete their somersault. As the tide came closer I contemplated going for a swim but the water looked cold as hell.

I'd made it in to L.A. late the night before—six hours or so after I was meant to—and by the time I got to Clara's Isabel was the only one still up. She led me outside to the deck, eager to show me the view, but even with the moon out and almost full it was too dark to see a thing.

As I sat outside that morning, the sky over me a blood orange, at one point the door behind me creaked, followed by light footfall, and as I turned my head Sara was there standing over me. She had on a sailor's hat and her hair was braided and tied well beyond her own stylist abilities. And in her hands she held a plastic pail and shovel.

"Good mornin' there, sailor," I said.

She put the pail down and frowned. "Captain," she said.

"Captain," I said, my hands up.

She ran down the steps to the beachfront, and for a moment she stared through the sand as if it had already been melted and turned to glass; moments later she was on the ground, and with her hands she pulled the sand in to her, patting it down from every angle till it became a perfect cylinder.

"You can use your pail for that, honey," I said to her.

"That's no fun," she shrugged.

Later that morning when everyone was up Clara insisted we all go out for breakfast. She took us to a place at the foot of a hill that was parched and rosy against the sunlight and we ordered mimosas and poached eggs. Clay was in New York but he'd be there in a few days, Clara said. Since the last time I'd seen her, she'd fired her manager after he'd milked her Billboard number one and signed advertising deals without running them by her first. This wasn't a big deal in itself—that sort of thing was often expected of a manager—but one of these clothing lines was notorious for its support of conservative pro-life groups, and there was no way Clara would let them use her face on their ads. Her lawyers stepped in and had the deal nixed and the whole thing was kept quiet, but in Clara's eyes the breach of confidence was irreparable, and therefore not even a third straight week in the Billboard top 5 was enough to distract Clara and save Jeffrey Summers Esq. from getting himself canned.

As Clara told us about this over breakfast, I almost brought up Tony. He was still too small time for her, but the impression I got from the little I knew of him was that he was smart, loyal and dedicated to his clients—all rare traits in this business. My train of thought was diverted, though, when Clara slipped an envelope to Sara across the table. As an early birthday gift she'd signed her up to Weeping Willow Day Camp, a place near Malibu where Hollywood would send its kids during seasonal breaks. Sara opened the pamphlet and I could see the words *DAY 3: Nature Trek* from where I was sitting.

When Clay arrived that Sunday, he looked a lot older than I'd remembered him. Granted, I'd only met the man once before, six years earlier, but he'd seemed to have aged beyond that, like he'd skipped his 40s entirely. He spoke like a prohibition-era fatcat—like he had a cigar dangling between his teeth at all times. He and I sat on a living room couch pounding back an \$800-bottle of Kentucky bourbon that evening, talking about everything from the Yankees' Pennant hopes to Clara's shot at a Grammy. I mentioned the Streams at one point and how they had a really good

record coming out soon, careful to downplay how great it actually was so that Clara wouldn't think I thought it was better than hers. Whether they're popstars selling out arenas or hipsters playing to a crowd of three in a Mile End café, musicians are a sensitive bunch and one must tread lightly when their egos are at stake.

As we talked, Clay explained how he'd long ago switched over—for the most part—to the live performance side of the music business, seeing record production as a doomed industry as far as making money went, even the digital sales part of it. No real coin there. He'd recently had a change of heart, though. Something he thought had a lot to do with what I'd said on that boat that one time. About addressing the industry's past mistakes and making amends. He'd been in talks with a team of what he called major players in rock and hip-hop to develop some sort of hi-fi music streaming website, where there'd be a monthly fee to subscribe, he explained, and not only would royalties be paid out to the artists, but also to the fans who helped promote the music.

"Ain't it just great?" he said. "Now every kid in America with a computer will be able to play music exec."

"Yeah, 'cause that's what the world so badly needs," Clara let out in jest. "An entire generation of little David Geffens and Suge Knights running around."

He made it sound like it was about giving back, but in reality—as we'd find out later—100,000 clicks of the share button would still leave you short on a Big Mac. Most of the performers he'd curated for his team were eager to invest in his project or become spokespeople, Clay explained, before going on to namedrop a half-dozen or so of them. Everyone wanted a piece of it. This is why he was spending so much time in New York in those days. When I asked him what'd made him switch back, he joked about saving the music business.

"Wishful thinking," he laughed. "Right?"

“But really,” Isabel said, overhearing our conversation as she walked into the living room, pacing around as if there to cross-examine Clay. “Why this sudden change of heart? Why now?”

“Gut instinct,” Clay said with a shrug. “It’s just a matter of time till most of these labels and distributors fold anyway. Someone’s gotta pick up the jetsam.

“That’s how the smarter labels will survive,” he continued, turning to me. “Fewer and fewer physical copies are being produced. We all know that. They’ve become niche collectors’ items in a way—that’s why vinyl’s doing so well—but there’s not enough of that to go around and keep everyone fed.”

“Surely that must all be good for the music,” Isabel pointed out.

Clay raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his drink. “How d’you figure that?”

“Hopefully people will keep making records for the love of it,” Isabel continued, getting more and more animated—something perhaps only I’d noticed. “Rather than just a drive to be rich and famous,” she added. Turning to me, “You even say so yourself,” she said, “all you need these days to make an album is a laptop and a microphone. Pretty much anyone can make one. Surely that’s a good thing.”

Clay rocked his head side to side in consideration. “What do you think?” he asked, turning back to me. “Other than the fact the biz is altogether fucked.”

Even if it was a dying industry, the idea of a man with a \$10-million beach house in Malibu saying the biz was fucked when the booze on the table was worth more than what most touring musicians I knew made in an entire month was in itself fucked.

“Isabel’s right, though,” I said. “Maybe taking power away from labels will ultimately level a few things out. Too many artists focus too much effort on getting signed. You should see some of these unsigned bands I work with—you can tell when that’s their main goal—it affects their decisions. It brings in all this compromise, and compromise kills more records than someone like

Bruno Burns. Nine times out of ten they end up making boring albums. In that respect, maybe labels dying is actually for the best.”

“Well, that’s where I’m hoping I come in with this,” Clay said looking over to Isabel, then to Clara who was sitting on her own at the table, Clay’s hands raised as if to validate the need for his streaming site with my last argument. “But what I’m also wondering,” he continued, “is if they’re not pressed into some you can grab hold of…” He clasped a Southern Living magazine on the table with both hands for emphasis. “Then are they still *albums*? Or, as you people call them, *records*? Do we even still need records?”

Clara broke the ensuing silence by making her wine glass sing with her finger. We all stayed quiet for a moment, carried away by the sound it made—some of us even grateful for the break in conversation—and the next thing I knew Clay was nodding off on my shoulder.

“Clay,” Clara got up and shook him by the arm. “Time for bed, Clay.”

Clay stood up and apologized for being a bore, blaming it on the flight over from New York, and then disappeared up the staircase with Clara behind him. Clara came back down shortly after and proposed the three of us go for a swim outside in the heated pool, but before we’d even dipped a toe in she’d nodded off under a blanket on a chair outside.

“What’s up with these West Coast folks,” Isabel said walking over towards her with a blanket. “Such lightweights, huh?”

The air was frigid but the water in the pool very warm. With the lights underneath us we couldn’t see much outside the pool other than the gazebo faintly lit and aswirl in white serpentine lights at the far end. Isabel faced the entrance to the house, her elbows outside the pool, and I had my arms around her. Behind us the ocean waves hummed like static.

“You know he’s going to ask you to be part of this project of his, right?” Isabel said in my ear, softly enough for Clara not to hear in case she was awake.

“I figured.”

“Well,” she said. “Any thoughts?”

“I guess I’ll wait and see what he says. Why, what do you think?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Just wondering if you were actually considering making a deal with a man who wants the record as a format dead. You being you and all.”

“Yeah—when you put it that way...”

“Not only that,” she said, “but his whole project sounds like some kind of pyramid scheme for music fans. Avon for the i-Tunes generation. Just be careful, will you?”

Clay had another meeting in New York to go to, his suitcase packed and sitting next to him when I met him in Beverly Hills, where over lunch and a pitcher of margaritas he gave me his spiel on why I should join his project.

“I don’t get it, though?” I asked. “I’m a producer. Next to these rock and rap icons you already have signed up, I’d be the odd man out. The kids using this platform will have no idea who I am. They’ll probably think I’m some obscure DJ or something. And you know how these mainstream kids are! There’s nothing they hate more than shit they’ve never heard of.”

“You’re selling yourself short,” he protested. “But at the end of the day I want you on this for the same reason I wanted you to make Clara’s record.” After noticing me mulling this over, “And I was right about that,” he threw his hands up. “Clara just wanted my opinion,” he said tilting his head to the left. “I wasn’t going to suggest Steve fuckin’ Jennings, was I?”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said. “For her sake.”

“Jokes aside, you’ve always added credibility to the projects you work with. No doubt about that. You have some kind of... golden touch... in that respect. I even knew you had that burning inside you the day I met you on that boat. That, my friend, ain’t going anywhere. But now you also

have a number one record. A few Grammy nods so far, too, and I'm willing to bet that at the end of the year you'll even have a few of them trophies in a display case inside your home. Why not make the most of it?"

"Make the most of it how?"

"Branch out," he said. "Open up a little. Let it go to your head just a tiny bit. You've worked so hard to get here, man. Enjoy the damn ride at least!"

"And how do I do that exactly?"

"I don't know..." he said. "Maybe make a hip-hop record or something? Or show your face on the red carpet once in a while? At the Grammys, or the Oscars, or even the Tonys!"

"A hip-hop record? What the hell would I be doing at the Tonys?"

"You get what I mean," he continued with a dismissive hand swat. "Look at these producers today. Timbaland, Diplo, Dre, Pharrell—you name it—they're not working out of some cave like Eno or Albini. They're out there front stage and centre!"

"I don't know Clay," I said. "You sound like you'd have me doing Doritos Superbowl commercials in no time."

"You playin' hardball, right now?" he laughed. "Is that what this is?" Despite the tables around us all being free he took out a pen and wrote a figure on a napkin he then turned and slid over to me. I was just as surprised by the fact I'd just seen someone actually do this in real life as I was by the figure itself.

"What's the matter?" he chuckled. "The amount of zeroes make you forget how to speak?"

No doubt it was a serious amount of cash.

"Tell you what," I said after a long pause. "If you can do me a small favour to sweeten the deal, I'll consider this."

“The deal ain’t already sweet enough?” he said. “I need an insulin shot just looking at the damn thing. Come on, man.”

“It’s a pretty sweet deal, Clay,” I conceded.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “Go on—I’m listening.”

“Clara mentioned you own this art gallery in Soho. I don’t know if you know, but Isabel’s paintings...”

“Of course I know about her paintings,” he said. “Clara says they’re great and keeps telling me we need to buy a few of them while we can still afford them. So, OK, we put on a show for her at the gallery and I get invites out to all the right people—done.” He pulled out a cigar and lit it with a match. “Is that it?”

“Well, now that you mention it,” I said. “I kind of had two more in mind.”

“Two more!” he said feigning indignation. “Just kidding, just kidding. I’m your genie in a bottle, baby. Three wishes. Name ’em. Keep ’em coming.”

“Tony, the Streams’ manager,” I said. “I think he’d be a great fit for Clara. Now that she’s without a manager. I’ve seen the way he works, he’s meant for the...”

“Meant for the what?”

“I was going to say *big leagues*, but realized it sounded ridiculous.”

Clay laughed. “See? You’re one of us after all.”

“Anyway, I’m not suggesting you hire him out of the blue,” I continued. “But maybe meet him and have a talk? If you like him, I don’t know, groom him for something?”

“I’m not making any promises,” Clay said. “But you give me his number and I’ll video with him after I get back and see what he’s about.”

“Number three is the trickiest of them all,” I then continued. “Because I’m not sure quite what I’m asking. It’s about my buddy Jay—he used to make these great short films and one of them was even raved about at Sundance.”

“No small feat.”

“Well, he’s sort of floating in the aether at the moment,” I explained. “I guess I just want to help him find a small gig on an arthouse project somewhere that he’d enjoy. Something that would help get him back into it. Cameraman, DOP, whatever!”

“You know,” Clay said, puffing on his cigar. “You could’ve asked me any of these things independent to my offer and I would’ve given you a resounding yes.” He put the cigar down in the notch of the ashtray. “But yeah, I know just the guy for your friend,” he said. “So, the answer is yes to all to three, whether or not you say yes to what I’m proposing. But if you *do* accept, let it be because you want to be a part of this. Or for crying out loud let it at least be for the money! Not for things I’d have been happy to do anyway. We’re practically family, man.”

That afternoon Clay left straight for LAX after lunch, and when I got to the house Isabel was sitting out on the deck on her own.

“Where’s Sara?” I asked her.

“Clara took her to the zoo,” she said.

“How about you and I go for a walk?”

We wandered down radial roads till we hit the local promenade, breathing in the salt air, and once past Laguna Point we reached a walkway that led to a public beach called Pirate’s Cove. The sun was out and warm against our necks, and Isabel took my hand and pulled me over to sit with her on a stone by the path. A kite was blowing waywardly in the wind as she took my hand again and led me down the walkway onto the sand. Flat on our backs we stared at the clear sky above. I told her about the idea of putting on an art show for her in New York and she sat up real quick and

asked if I was for real. We then noticed the kite from before now farther down the shore. Closer to us a kid was playing with a beachball a few feet from us, and the breeze blew it away down the shore and towards the kite in three uneven bounces. The wind paused long enough for the ball to stop rolling and even stay still a while, as if to give the kid a sporting chance of catching it, but when he got near it blew it away again. We both couldn't help but laugh at this poor kid's struggle to get his ball back.

Sara's skin was olive by the time she made it home that evening. She appeared on the deck in a white sundress wearing a crown of wire and violet petals, holding a glass of Coca-Cola with an orange slice on the rim, and running over to me she pulled my arm down from my book.

"What you reading?" she said, soft and singsong.

"A book called *St. Urbain's Horseman*," I said peering over my sunglasses.

"I've never seen any horses on St. Urbain," she objected.

"It's just a name," I said. "How was the zoo?"

She nodded mid-slurp of her Coke. "Fun," she said. "Real fun."

"Any horses there?"

She shook her head and said there weren't, not unless zebras counted as stripy horses, and then she put the bottle down on the floor and walked over to the deck's edge, and pointing towards the horizon she told me to look, adding that the sky way over there looked like embers after a wood fire.

*

News about the fire didn't reach me until the morning after, and by then it was already afternoon in Montreal. Neither the cops nor the insurance company would tell me much about what had caused it, or exactly how much damage there was. Just that I should get down there when I could and that they'd investigate in the meantime.

The next day, just before boarding the plane at LAX I phoned up Jay to ask him to go and salvage what—if anything—there was left to save.

On the flight over I'd convinced myself the fire couldn't have been caused by anything other than something banal like an electrical failure or what not, under my breath cursing the city because it was always letting things fall apart. When it wasn't overpasses it was things like this.

Eight hours later I pulled out of a taxi and Jay was standing in the alley by the studio side door waiting for me, squatted down on the heels of his Converse against the faded red brick. From the outside the building looked the same as it always had, but there was this hollowness when you looked at the windows, like looking at someone you've known your entire life and them looking back at you with vacant eyes.

"You just missed the insurance people," Jay said as we walked through the front door. "I have to warn you, man. It doesn't look too good."

Inside, I was relieved at first to see that the live room, though left in a jumble, hadn't taken a hit as bad as I'd expected. It looked as if everything had been shoved to one side of the room to prevent the fire from spreading, but none of it had sustained any significant damage. Not from the smoke or flames at least. But as we kept going, shards of glass from one of the vocal booths covered the floor on the way to the control room.

The control room was by far the worst. The '72 Olive Series mixing console I'd had shipped from Tennessee was beyond any form of repair or even recognition, crushed under both monitors, which had fallen off their stands, both seeming to have collapsed inwards. I knew it would be hard to find a console like that again but it was still replaceable. More than anything I worried about the tapes—most of all the Streams one, as it hadn't yet been mixed down to any other format other than the promo single.

The tape machine was wrecked but there was no way I'd left it on there when I took off for California. The closet I used as an archive was intact but the Streams record wasn't in there, either. Jay and I dug under debris and ash with our bare hands but still no sign of the tape. We flipped over what was left of the mixing console after removing the monitors from on top of it; if what was underneath the mixing board was indeed the tape, then I watched it scatter in a bloom of dust—but I was fairly certain that wasn't it. All the other tapes that hung off the top shelves surrounding the room had fallen off, and we looked through each one, frantic as we opened them to make sure the label on the tape itself matched the one on the box. We gave up after about an hour as night-time began encroaching on our only source of light, and we sat on the floor, covered in soot, and didn't say a word until we couldn't see each other anymore.

“Come on,” I felt Jay tap me on the shoulder. “I'll buy you a beer.”

We sat over pints of 50 in a Park Avenue dive I hadn't set foot in in years looking like we'd just returned from the coalmines. I'd picked that place when Jay had asked me where I wanted to go because I knew most of Mile End would have heard about the fire by then, and if I was going to sit somewhere and feel miserable I wanted to at least spare myself of everyone's pity. But, like just about every other dive in Mile End, this old, run-down tavern was now a hip hangout. They were even having a slam poetry thing that night.

Between people coming over with shots and expressing their sympathies, Jay managed to restore some sense of hope in me by pointing out that maybe the cleaners would find it once they'd sorted out the place, that it was damn near impossible for a tape to disappear and that it was bound to turn up somewhere. He managed to lift my spirits by being his usual caustic self when the slam poets came on, while at the same time defending the youth of today for being shit at things like poetry; Sesame Street had been pumping them with stupid apple a day keeping doctors away rhymes since they were in diapers, he offered as an explanation. "Shit's bound to go wrong after that," he said.

"And you somehow avoided that in your childhood?" I asked.

"We didn't have a TV, man! My mom read me *Howl* in the crib," he said. "And I still don't go out pretending I'm a fuckin' poet."

Between all that I was starting to feel a little better.

But I woke up drenched in sweat on Jay's couch the next morning, feeling so low. I helped myself to a can of Stella from Jay's fridge and showered the soot off my skin, and then went home to change my clothes.

When I saw Tony at his office later that day, he was far from understanding. At least at first.

"What do you mean the tape's gone?" he asked me.

"It's just... not there," I said.

"And you never made a backup?"

"It doesn't really work like that, Tony."

He paced around the room. "And the cops still ain't saying nothing about what started the fire?"

"Not a thing."

Then he sat back down, clutching his head in his hands. “How the hell am I gonna break this to Jenn?” he raised his voice a touch, but apologized for doing so as soon as he’d finished speaking. “They’re finishing a leg in the States right now,” he explained. His elbows now rested on his desk with his fingers interlaced in front of his face as if in prayer.

“Just don’t say anything to her,” I said. “Don’t say anything to anyone for now. There’s still hope it’ll turn up.”

Peering over his knuckles he blinked slowly as if to say I should give it a rest.

“Look Tony,” I said, “you think I’m happy about this? This is my album, too. I poured so much fuckin’ sweat into it. I know what it means to Jenn. I know what it means to all of you. My studio is a pile of rubble right now and not being able to find this record is the part I find the most devastating about the whole fuckin’ thing!”

His face filled up. “You’re right,” he said.

And over the next week I waited for the cops to submit their final report to the insurance company and for the disaster-recovery people to finish cleaning up the mess left by the fire. Meanwhile Sara kept asking when I’d be back in California.

“Not sure at this point,” I said to Isabel over the phone. “I’m doing my best here.”

“She’s been in a snit since you left,” Isabel said.

“Let’s play it day by day,” I said.

Two days later we were at the studio with an investigator from the insurance company when he asked me if I had an alibi, as if asking if I could prove I hadn’t started the fire myself; I almost lost my shit on the guy. I lost it on Tony, too. He told me how the band had taken it really badly, especially Jenn, and how they’d almost cancelled the rest of the Northeast leg.

“Why the fuck would you tell them? We agreed to wait a little longer.”

“She and I were on the phone, man,” Tony explained. “I just couldn’t *not* tell her. She was going on and on about the album. It was breaking my fuckin’ heart, man.”

The fact it took so long to get a report still really fucked with my head. It made it sound like there was some kind of wrongdoing somewhere, like someone had it in for me and did this on purpose. But who had I fucked over so bad they’d want to burn down my studio? Then I wondered if someone was jealous of the Streams and wanted to sabotage their career. Maybe they’d sabotaged it themselves! Or maybe someone wanted to fuck with Tony. He was, after all, as Jay pointed out, Italian, from St. Leonard, and the Calabrians and Sicilians and Haitians were all beefing in those days and Italian cafés were getting fire-bombed all over the place.

Embarrassingly enough all these thoughts crossed my mind. So when I got the police and insurance reports confirming the fire was indeed started by an electrical failure, due to a faulty power line, on city property, part of me was reassured yet not the least bit surprised. I wasn’t kidding about everything always falling apart in this city. The slabs of concrete falling off the Big O, or off downtown hotels; or roads looking like they’d endured prolonged mortar fire come spring; or the De la Concorde overpass; or both official languages. The *STM* going without say. Any construction site, city hall, Habs management, the S.P.V.M.—badge no. 728, case in point; the fact someone can spend \$700,000 to repair Mordecai’s gazebo and it still ends up looking the fuckin’ same. This city was that kid from your elementary school whose pen never fuckin’ worked, whose socks were always ridden with holes; whose parents drove to school in a dying clunker, only four days out of five because on the fifth it wouldn’t even start. Everything it touched seemed to crumble.

Meanwhile the Streams carried on with their tour, but from what I’d heard through Tony, they wondered if there was even any point of carrying on other than to recoup the money they’d spent on visas and travel. Jenn knew there was no way she’d ever be able to make that album again. I knew that, too. The rest of the band was willing to give it a try, but it wasn’t ever going to happen.

At least the live shows were pulling in some great reviews, they figured. Pitchfork had done a whole write up on the Boston show, declaring the new songs a triumphant return to form, hyping up what they said could be the most promising record of the year. Of course, there was no record anymore.

But the tour seemed to have been given a boost by the reviews, and it wasn't until they'd hit Providence that they'd noticed that something was different about Jenn—something they'd described to Tony as *off*. For a band that knew each other so well, this was worrying. By the time they'd hit Hartford, Jenn's playing, the band had reported, had been sloppy and out of time—words I'd never heard used to describe Jenn's playing before. They told Tony they'd have a talk with her, and apparently they did, but she'd just denied anything was wrong, said that she was just tired, as one gets from the road.

Two days later she fell off stage in Philly. But she insisted she was fine and carried on and ended up playing what they'd described as the best show of their tour. In New York they had a day off until their show at Irving Plaza, last show of the leg. The band promised they'd make sure Jenn got plenty of rest, assuring Tony they'd gone out and got her food and cigarettes and Mojo magazine and a six-pack of Gatorade to replenish her electrolytes so she wouldn't have to leave her bed at all that day. She was sleeping in the room she shared with Dave when the rest of them slipped out to the bar on the corner for a beer. When they came back she was on the floor facedown in her own puke, after what was later revealed as an O.D., on a cocktail of opiates, benzodiazepines, and cough syrup. Nervous system shutdown. She'd been self-medicating her way through the leg without anyone ever being able to pinpoint what was happening. The coroner's report ruled it a suicide, but nobody would ever really know for sure.

News about the tape missing came out after that, and one music magazine pointed that her passing was clouded in the same sense of mystery as the album's disappearance. It was a stupid thing to say. A tape still had a chance of turning up some day.

A week after that the Streams' label threatened to sue us. First of all, they wanted their money back. I'd given my twenty-grand share to Jenn's family in B.C. as they'd struggled with funeral and repatriation costs, but ultimately if I had to give them back the money they'd paid for production, too, so be it—what the fuck did I have left to care? But Tony insisted that *that* money was paid for a service, a service that was provided, and therefore anything caused by the fire was for the insurance companies to deal with. A matter of principle. He tried defending the band's advance, too, but his case was thin. There was no record to put out.

Then the people at Malware said the thing that really got to me. They wanted all the money back, but they still didn't want to nix the new contract, claiming that if the tape was ever found, it would still be rightfully theirs. In which case they'd give the money back to us again. It was bullshit. They wanted it both ways. Tony and I left their office in New York fuming. He and I had a whiskey at a bar down on East 21st street, cursing everyone at Malware by name, then he went back to our hotel in Williamsburg. I stuck around and had two more, then decided to make my way back too.

Fuck these pricks, I thought to myself. As ridiculous as it might seem to fight for a tape that didn't exist, there was no way I could allow them to get the rights to it.

And after I'd walked onto the train to Brooklyn, a man holding a ukulele got stuck in the closing doors. I got off my seat and rushed over to hold them open for him to get through.

"Thanks," he said looking at me, then up at the subway map. "Wrong train," he added impassively, "but whatever."

By then someone had already stolen my seat. The man with the ukulele started strumming chords as the train took off. Beside me with her hand on the same pole was a blonde girl, in her

early-20s, up to my chin in her red three-inch heels, her lips moving as she read lines from a script she held creased in her other hand. A cracked-out guy in a Duke University sweater wobbled and weaved as the train rode on. It was so hot and crowded that a woman standing at the far end corner of the wagon fainted, clearing a row of seats as the man she was with caught her just before she hit the ground and carried her towards the bench. Splay-limbed she was sat as her eyes opened, frightened and appearing to not recognize where she was, who she was with, nor her own name. A woman sitting on the opposite side pulled the emergency brake while her friend shouted instructions. The train came to a halt at the next stop and by then the woman had come to. She refused E.M.S.—said she didn't have insurance—and was escorted off the train by the man she was with and a New York Transit worker.

Ten minutes later the train was still at the station with the doors open. The blonde woman next to me sighed out loud as she looked up and down the platform.

“Late for your audition?” I asked her.

“It's not until Friday,” she shook her head.

She said her name was Cat. She was a bartender on the side to support the acting, and later that week she had an audition for a role in a film with Scarlett Johansson—to play a bartender. She asked me if I lived in Brooklyn and I said I was only staying there for a few days. She asked me what I did.

“I own every single Bells of Passion record,” she said when I told her about the ones I'd made.

Once the train pulled into her stop, she was about to get off and asked me if I had time for a drink. She took me to a place called Sunsets where I ordered us a bottle of wine. She wore large hoopie earrings and constantly flicked her hair back behind her ear. We finished the rest of the wine and she suggested we go back to her apartment for a drink on the rooftop.

For a moment I wondered how a bartender could afford a place with a rooftop in New York but then decided it didn't matter—that at that moment nothing mattered—that there was now and nothing else. With a view of the East River and Manhattan, we sat up there, drinking and smoking at the same time, a rarity in New York City as she pointed out, and she told me about playing a call-girl in a German film that had been screened at Cannes the previous year. We were both drunk by the time we walked backed down to the apartment. She sat on the corner of her bed, a wistful look on her face, twirling her glass of wine and staring into space, as I curled up beside her, my hand on the small of her back. She placed her glass down on the floor and nestled her head on top of my shoulder. She kissed me and I kissed her back. Still in most of our clothes, we fucked on the sheepskin carpet. Afterwards as we sat back up on the bed, I saw she was on the verge of falling asleep, her lithe body limp, and I took off her heels and tossed some blankets over her, shutting the lights off and going back up to the patio for another cigarette.

Manhattan's skyline was ablaze through a layer of mist as it got dark and started to rain. To my right the Queensboro Bridge appeared faded behind the haze, and as it started raining harder it was eclipsed entirely. I walked back into the bedroom to find Cat in deep sleep, sprawled diagonally across the bed. Beside her, on my back I stared at the ceiling; cracks were forming on the drywall and I imagined rain dripping through the rooftop floor, causing the whole thing to collapse down on me. I tried to remember the name of the German film she was in as I turned to my side; then I got up and showed myself out before walking the rest of the way to Williamsburg in the rain.

*

There were days I had trouble even looking Sara in the eye, like it was her I'd betrayed, like I now deserved it as some sort of penance. Tony and I had reached a settlement with the label: they got their money but eventually backed off the rights to the album. They probably realized that if it hadn't turned up yet, it never would—which made me more determined than ever to find the tape.

Over the course of a long and gruelling week, with Jay and Sara's help, I managed to put the studio back together into working condition, but for some reason it still looked hollow to me inside and out. We'd found some unlabelled boxes of tape, and we tried playing them in the new machine, but we couldn't find the one we were looking for.

The idea of knowing that an album that good had been made but that nobody would ever get to hear it was difficult to digest at times. Dave had said something to me at his sister's funeral that how had I not convinced them to record the album on tape, or even make it in the first place, none of this would've happened and that Jenn would still be there, which was uncalled for, I thought—maybe even deserving a punch in the mouth had it not been for the fact that he was the one who'd just buried his sister. So I said nothing.

On certain days I even wondered if there was something almost poetic about an album you could only hear once before it would self-destruct or something; where all you'd be left with was the memory of what you'd felt when you first heard it, knowing that that was that, instead of making yourself believe you could recreate the feeling. Like when you're sixteen and you first hear the Ramones or the Clash and you spend the next decades going through entire catalogues of records, but with every year that goes by it gets less and less likely anything will come close to matching the feeling. And past the age of thirty, you're meant to just forget it.

I'd come to terms with that. The records I made, I'd only try to predict how people would feel when they heard them, but I'd long stopped feeling that way myself—and I knew it wouldn't be long till I wouldn't even be able to predict it anymore either. The Streams album was an exception. Maybe the last of that I had left. All of it was changing. Especially the relationship people had with music. While we were fixing up the studio Sara was bouncing around to the beat of a tune playing on the radio at one point. When it ended she asked me if I could play it again for her. I had no idea what it was. I googled the three or four words that were repeated over and over and found it on iTunes. *Bubble Gum* by Anna Bellhop. A minute later she was bouncing to it again. She'd never know what it was to hear a song and have it in your head for months before finding out the title. She'd never know about saving up your money to buy a record.

I ordered fifty reels of ATR tape from the one and only place in the U.S. that still exported them to Canada and bought a new mixing console.

“I see you're still holding on to the vestigial recording studio museum aesthetic,” Jay joked when we unwrapped the console.

“Determined to,” I said. “Now more than ever.”

But if there was anything vestigial in that room, it wasn't any of the gear, it was something in my head—or even in Jay's. The idea of a generation that didn't know music before the internet made me feel sorry for Sara.

I spent more time teaching Sara to play the piano. Our studio's piano wasn't damaged in the fire, and so I had it brought home. I had to remind Sara to practice her scales daily at first, but after a while she'd do it on her own and ask me to show her some new stuff. I taught her *Für Elise* and she'd ask me to play *Maple Leaf Rag* for her. Having that piano there made me sit down and play more often, too, and I realized I missed writing songs and wondered if maybe I'd stopped for the wrong reasons. I even thought about getting in touch with some old bandmates, but knowing I'd

regret that decision if I did, I just carried on writing songs on the piano and waited for business at the studio to start back up again.

I knew I'd had enough of making certain kinds of albums, and it's not like I needed the money anymore, so I told myself I'd focus on local unsigned bands and record them at a discounted rate. My friend, the rapper Wa Lapli, would come by with his kids after school, and by kids I don't mean his own but the ones in his Parc X *at-risk teens* outreach program, and he'd plug in a drum machine and lay down a hip-hop beat, and the dozen-or-so teens would crowd the three mic stands in the live room to get a rhyme in, after which Wa would run a clinic, about phrasing or cadence or rhyming or what have you; and after the kids had gone home, high-fiving Wa one by one on the way out, Sara would bust out of her shell and start spitting rhymes of her own.

I'd done such a great job distracting myself from the guilt that was teeming after everything that had happened—maybe even too good of a job—but somehow I found myself back at the beginning. Worse than the beginning. And that's when you see something isn't right. When Isabel comes back from a weekend of visiting her mother and she tells you that she stayed an extra few days because she couldn't fly. How she was pregnant and then the next day she wasn't pregnant anymore. How she couldn't tell you over the phone. And then you both cry together and the hardest part is how much it takes to convince those closest to you that everything else will be alright. Because this is *on you*, you keep telling yourself, and you do what you have to do to muster that energy from somewhere, so that everything looks fine from the outside, and so you try and smile on the Sunday stroll up Murray Hill, or at the E.C.S. dance recital, or the dark autumn weekend drive to Morin Heights, where you're surrounded on both sides by trees looking as skeletal as you feel inside; you feign excitement for your three Grammy nominations, soon surrendering again to holiday doldrums when the families meet for the yearly feast in Brooklyn, as you watch your mother left verklempt over just how fast her little Sara has grown; and as you kiss your love under a haloed

moon gleaming back at you on a fifth-floor Astoria balcony at midnight, the lights of the Queensboro Bridge just won't stop shaking their heads at you; but the post-holiday lulls aren't so bad—being a recluse is expected—and then you're blowing candles on coffee crunch cake with Sara next to you, feeling almost good about yourself, grateful you stuck around to meet this little angel, or to see Clara thank you twice in the same night during the Grammy telecast; but all of a sudden you feel like you're back at the start again, and that thought scares you, and you see your patience thinning, wondering how someone can need sixteen fuckin' takes to record a simple pentatonic riff, or how incompetent you have to be to top the tank up with diesel on the way back from the cottage when you fuckin' well know your car doesn't have a diesel engine; so she starts wondering if there's something wrong, baby, because there's something she's been wanting to tell you for quite a while now, and she has this nauseous feeling you know about it somehow and that that would explain why you're acting this way, so impatient and all, when in fact you have no clue what her hangdog expression's all about, and she tells you there was this one night not so long ago, where she'd, you know, been with someone, and your face empties and you ask who, and she brings up Clara; bemused, you're not sure if that makes you feel better or worse, and you break the silence by asking her if she prefers girls or something and she shakes her head and says that no she doesn't, that they were sitting home one night painting and listening to music and drinking too much rosé and one thing led to another and that was all there was to it; how it meant nothing; how she'd gotten serious with you before she was even out of NYU and how maybe she's missed out on things, but that she's really, really sorry, baby; but now the petulant fuck inside you is prodding, trying to get you to shout out something about that actress you fucked on the sheepskin rug, to emphasize how much she'd loved it, but instead you force yourself to breathe deep; you consider telling her you have a confession for her, too, because it's either that or you hold the grudge or convince yourself it's not a big deal, that it's not like someone had their dick inside her, girls being girls on a warm night, that's

all it was; but then the realization hits you, that none of this even matters because there may not be anything left to salvage at this point, you think, and so you may as well come clean about how you'd, you know, been with someone, too, stingy on the details because you don't want to hurt her *too* bad, but she's crying and calling you a cunt then crying some more, restraining her sobs so not to disturb our little princess's slumber in the room down the hall; and then the tears subside, for a little while, and you both lie on your backs smoking king-sized Camels, blowing smoke up towards the ceiling wondering what the fuck just happened, a cool breeze creeping in through the window cracked open, and you tell each other maybe this was a long time coming, while she stares back at you, her eyes vacant, like windows looking out a building gutted by fire, but for a minute you find some reassurance in that maybe you can both remain civil here, and she says goodnight and turns to her side, and you turn to yours, and as you hear her muffled cries you wonder where this all began, and you hear her breath slowly winding down while you stare right in front of you, mired in your own confusion, wondering if maybe things will somehow be alright in the morning, wondering just how easily things can be forgotten; people get through worse, you tell yourself; and on that note you fall asleep and for once you sleep a dreamless night, and when you wake up she isn't there; you peek past the curtains and out the window and see the 15-inch tire-tracks obliquely rutted in the sleet; you call Sara's name but it just resonates down the hallway with no response. You find a note. Gone to NY, it says. Signed Isabel. No loves, Xs, or Os this time around.

four.

Interrupting me from the reverie comes the waitress appearing from behind my seat, her skinny black necktie dangling as she reaches over me to pick up the bottle on my table, and as she tips it into my glass, empty now for quite some, she tells me, in English, that they've received a message for me at the bar.

“A message?” I say, surprised, for a moment even wondering from whom it could be. There's only one person who knows I'm here, though.

She lifts the bottle to the light as if to examine the contents, and then puts it back down on the coaster. “From a mister Jay,” she says now looking at me. “He said to tell you he was on his way and that you shouldn't leave till he gets here.”

A mister Jay. That makes me laugh. Fuckin' Jay, I think to myself. Moments earlier he'd made me feel like I was in *Godot*, now he's sending telegrams to a hotel like some character in a Hemingway novel.

“How did you know the message was for me?” I ask her, a little intrigued. “Who did he say it was for?”

“He said to find a broody music-biz type, likely sitting on his own by a window, likely there with a bottle of wine to himself.”

“Ah.”

“It kind of narrowed it down,” she says before walking away.

Part of me still knows Jay well enough to know that his claiming to be on the way doesn't mean he actually is—nor is it a guarantee he will ever reach the destination. It means at best a 50/50 chance he'll be here, if I am to rely on stats pertaining to similar events in the past.

Noticing there's a foot of snow accumulated on the ground outside—and spending the night becoming more and more a likelihood—I take my glass with me out of the bar and down the hall to

the hotel reception, where I ask the woman behind the desk if they have any rooms left. She looks it up and says they still have one or two, but that's about it. I tell her I'll get back to her.

I'm intrigued, of course, by the fact that Jay has something he says he wants to show me. This urgency is by no means typical of him. I wanted to let myself wonder about it earlier, but didn't dare to in case I wouldn't ever get to find out what it was. I still don't really want to allow myself to think about it. Only because I know Jay so well.

That's the way it was with him. At times I thought there'd been something he'd been planning all along. Or still planning, even. It was like every project he'd get involved in was some sort of bizarre and unpredictable stepping stone for the next thing. But you never knew what the end-game was. And if you didn't know him that well, it would seem he was just bouncing around aimlessly from idea to idea. With no possible way for you to realize there were dots to even connect. But even if you did know him, and realized he was following some sort of a thread, one that at least made sense in his own mind, you had no idea what he would come up with next. You'd always want to root for him, though, no matter what. Even if you had no idea where he was going with it.

As I take a sip of wine I notice it now looks more opaque than it did before, even as I hold the glass up to the light.

"Is this your doing, angel?" I ask the cherub. "Have you been turning this wine to blood or something?"

No response, predictably. Such a furtive bunch, these angels—but I guess there's also perhaps a chance they've just dimmed the lights without me noticing and that he'd had nothing to do with it at all.

I catch the chandelier's reflection as I twirl the contents of the glass before putting it down. Gone to New York, the note had said.

In the months to come, I'd find myself going to New York more and more, too.

*

With a window on the evening foot traffic making its way across West 30th Street, in Midtown Manhattan, the Rolling Stone reporter, Diane Peters, and I sat on an L-shaped couch, tucked away in the nook of a bar that was also on the ground floor of a hotel. She had her notepad out on the round marble tabletop that stood between us in front of her, and beside it a red circle pulsed on the screen of her digital recorder.

“But days like that must happen,” she said to me. “When you notice things just aren’t working. What do you say, or what do you do, when you see a performer having a bad day? How do you put them back on track and get them to find that inspiration they need to nail the take?”

“To be honest, Diane,” I said. “I generally like to stay away from this idea of *inspiration*. It’s a dangerous word. I believe that as artists—and as musicians and producers—we should avoid using it altogether.”

“And why’s that?”

“It’s a misrepresentation of what actually goes on in a recording studio. For starters it makes it sound like a lot of what we do comes down to just dumb luck. Like we sit around all day and do nothing but wait for some kind of magic moment to appear out of thin air. Just getting stoned and hammered in the meantime. In reality, it’s a process—one far more laborious and methodical than one might sometimes assume. You spend years honing your skills, exploring the darkest caverns of your mind—you’re digging: you’re reading books, watching films, listening to all the records you can get your hands on—taking in everything you can—and this takes weeks, months, years. But then maybe one day, if you’re lucky, you have something you can use. It certainly doesn’t happen in a flash. Even the so-called epiphanies you sometimes hear about are usually years in the making.”

“Hmmm.”

“But then again, in some ways it’s almost like... having this dormant spirit inside of you. Once in a while you might successfully manage to wake it up, through the countless hours of hard work, and while it’s awake you might feed it and maybe great things will happen, but then the next thing you know it’s gone again and you have no way of knowing how long it’ll be till it comes back. But with time you get better and better at summoning that spirit. Most of all you get much better at receiving it. So if an artist doesn’t have that *inspiration*—for lack of a better word—it’s on them to keep going with this journey until they find it.”

“But then—let me rephrase that—what happens when you notice an artist just not living up to their potential? Do you say, let’s stop here for now, and send them back to the drawing board and try again the next morning?”

“To be honest, that’s not really my place. I have to make do with what I’ve got on any given day. A lot of people assume a producer’s job involves some kind of coaching component to it—a shrink component—but it’s rarely like that. Hardly ever in my experience. Most artists know they have to come in ready when they’re working with me. Analogue tape is much less forgiving for that. But I’m not there to tell them how to write their songs or how to perform them—hopefully they know how to do that already. And if they don’t, there isn’t much that I can do about that. My job—my duty—is to somehow just bring the best out of them while they’re there and capture that. And on a good day, it can mean not interfering at all.”

“You make it sound as though it can be as easy as just hitting the record button.”

“On a good day, that’s precisely what it is. But those are few and far between, too. On most days, I might give them gentle nudges, steer them in a certain direction once in a while, but they generally know what kind of album it is they want to make. They just might not know how to get there. Rarely do I need to resort to anything too radical. I make it a point to trust the artist’s vision. They’ve been conceiving these records in their heads since way before I got to step in.”

“Last year you made Clara Spencer’s *Nighttime in Day-Glo*. It won a Grammy for *Album of the Year*, and *Best Pop Solo Performance* for the title track. What was it like working with Clara?”

“She’s a fabulous performer—a fabulous and hard-working human being. A very dear friend, too. Few people I’ve worked with have the drive and dedication she has. She’s the first one there in the morning, last one to go home at night. Sticks around the studio even when she doesn’t absolutely have to—she wants to be part of the whole process. She’s a pleasure to work with and deserves all the success she’s been having. I really couldn’t be happier for her.”

“And *Nighttime in Day-Glo* was recorded in your studio—Park Lane Studios—in Montreal, Canada, and was one of the last albums recorded there under the studio’s original setup, before the fire happened—is that right?”

“Yeah, it was recorded a few months before the fire. Clara and the Illegal Streams were the last two artists I recorded at the studio before it burned down. I was actually staying at Clara’s at her house in L.A. when I found out about it.”

“How terrible.”

“It really was. It all took a lot of time to rebuild, obviously. The studio, that is. It was a trying experience, but unfortunately these things happen.”

“And of course in the middle of all this, another terrible tragedy, the passing of Jenn Blake of the Illegal Streams, after their master disappeared at the time of the fire?”

“Yes, well, I don’t think we can say for sure these incidents are connected, but Jenn was without a doubt a passionate, sensitive soul. She poured her heart into that record. One thing I can tell you for sure is that the news about the fire and the tape devastated her.”

“And what seems even more unbelievably tragic is that, when the full story recently unravelled, news eventually came out that the tape was never in the fire to begin with. An absolutely surreal sequence of events.”

“It’s beyond tragic. I had some people over at my studio one night. Sometimes I’d invite musicians and bands from the local scene to come and hang out, to give them a chance to see what a real pro recording studio was like. Anyway, this one kid, a budding sound engineer, really excited to be there, took pictures with me and asked a million questions about home recording. He told me he had in his apartment an old tape machine handed down to him by his granddad, who was a sound engineer in New York in the 70s. But the thing is, these tape reels, they can be quite hard to find nowadays, if you’re not a studio and ordering them in bulk—one tape will set you back three to four hundred bucks easy. This kid must’ve snuck off with an unlabelled box while I wasn’t looking. I don’t even know how he’d managed to do it—they don’t exactly fit in your pocket.”

“So this young man stole the Illegal Streams master tape right out of the studio?”

“Yes—but in his mind he was just taking a blank tape, figuring no one would ever even notice. He got home and looked inside, saw the notes attached and the track listing. At that point he was already too embarrassed to return it. He thought it was some old album and that no one would ever notice. Then he eventually read about Jenn’s passing, and that’s when he realized...”

“And of course you know all this because...”

“They showed me the note he’d left. He’d kept all this a secret for six months or so; then one day, according to the note, he’d been walking home from his band’s rehearsal and stopped in a Mile End record store. He saw Jenn’s debut album on display in the window and decided to buy it. He went home and put it on, and he apparently just broke down.”

“Wow... I can’t imagine how bittersweet the success of this record must be for you.”

“There’s no doubt about that.”

“The album in question, *Tumbleweeds*, was released just over two weeks ago. It’s been hailed by critics from Rolling Stone and Pitchfork as a ‘*landmark album*’, ‘*possibly the most important rock album of the last decade*’, ‘*a generation-defining piece of tragic beauty virtually unrivalled since the golden ages of rock*’. You

so rarely see a self-released album break the Billboard Top 10. Can you explain this decision, self-releasing this album?”

“In a way it was a no-brainer. The band found themselves without a record deal after everything that happened. When the album re-surfaced, we decided—me, the rest of the band, their manager—that this would be the only logical route to take. We’d even contemplated not releasing it at all. But ultimately we decided we’d do it for Jenn.”

“Now, people are always saying how critical and commercial success just so rarely go together.”

“Mhmm.”

“You have last year’s Grammy for *Album of the Year* under you belt. And this year the Illegal Streams’ *Tumbleweeds*, which has been called *genre-defining* and which will surely be up there on most of the critics’ lists this year. Both have already sold tons of copies. On top of that, Portal, the digital streaming project you’re a spokesperson for, hit one billion plays in its first month at the beginning of this year. Everything you touch seems to turn to gold. Where do you go from here? How do you possibly top all that?”

“I try not to think about these things, Diane. I’m just taking it one gig at a time. I try to serve the project I’m doing first and foremost. All these things concerning sales and reviews, you just can’t predict. All you can do is go in and try to make the best album you possibly can. To pay attention to the needs of each individual project, every single time.”

“That sounds like a very reasonable way of looking at it. Before we go, any last piece of advice for the young musicians and producers out there?”

“Yeah, keep going out there and fuckin’ up the mainstream the best you can.”

“Thank God this isn’t live T.V.,” Diane said, tapping her digital recorder with her index finger.

She put away her notepad and recorder in a charcoal messenger bag she tossed diagonally across her shoulder, and together we stepped outside to where the sun setting on the Hudson was bouncing off the windowpanes of the tall buildings. Once outside, she removed her jacket, a white tank top revealing her shoulders, toned and tan, with a sort of slender dancer's grace, though undeniably more muscular. I told her that her name sounded more suited for the 6 o'clock news than something like Rolling Stone, and she said it wasn't the first time she'd heard that. As she flagged down a cab she said she was meeting friends for a drink on the Lower East Side, at some place where the Strokes and Yeah Yeah Yeahs always used to hang out, and she asked me if I wanted to come with her.

"I'll meet you there if you leave me an address," I said to her.

Delving into her purse she pulled out a thin red marker she then used to write in my palm. "See you there," she said and jumped into the cab.

As I watched the taxi disappear down 10th Avenue, I followed a stony path that led to a courtyard behind the hotel, where I sat down on a bench and called Isabel—it was Sara who answered the phone. I wished her a happy birthday, pretending I was still in Montreal. I hadn't missed a single one of her birthdays until then, and though she was just on the other side of the Queensboro Bridge, I wouldn't see her that day. Isabel and I had decided—or more like she'd demanded and I'd conceded—that Sara would spend one weekend a month in Montreal till the end of the summer, and the rest of her time in New York. But Isabel also wanted Sara to start school in New York come September, and that wasn't something I was ready to let happen.

An hour later, I met back up with Diane in a Delancey Street bar, and I stayed with her even after her friends left. Sitting in a booth we knocked back bottles of Mexican beer; at one point she pulled me by the sleeve and dragged me to a stall in the women's bathroom where we sniffed lines off a set of house keys.

Back in the booth, “Off the record,” she said to me, “You ever fuck that Clara chick?”

“What kind of question is that?” I said.

“Meh. Just making small talk.” Holding her bottle of beer sideways she brought the neck to the corner of her lips. “So? Did you?”

“Well, to answer your question, if you really must know, no—I didn’t.”

“That’s a shame.”

I shrugged. “I don’t think I’m exactly her type, either.”

“She’s into chicks, isn’t she?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Call it a radar for these things,” she shrugged.

“As a matter of fact, I think Clara is one of those people... who gets off on... everything. Even *other* things.”

“Other things?” she snorted. “What kind of *other things* we talking about?”

“Like... the sound of her own voice.”

She winced. “That’s *so* not a thing, dude.”

“I’ve witnessed it,” I said. “First-hand, even.”

“First hand? What does that even mean?”

I rolled my eyes, unsure why I was even giving this info away. “It means I caught her rubbing one out to her own music, Diane.”

She gave three uneven chortles. “You for fuckin’ real? How on earth? Where did this happen?”

“I’ve already told you way too much,” I said. “You’re a fuckin’ reporter.”

With her right hand she made a fist, extending her pinky. “This shit still means something where I come from,” she said. “Now, what happened?”

“That’s pretty much it,” I said. “I was downstairs in the basement at the studio and saw her on the security monitor, going to town—so to speak—while I’d left her mixes playing in the control room.”

She slapped the table, rattling some of the empties strewn across it. “Holy fuckin’ shit. That is the best thing I’ve ever heard! At the same time it’s like, yeah, good for her—but also, that’s just so fuckin’ weird—if it’s the real reason and all. I love it, though. Colossally good piece of goss, man.”

“Don’t you dare print this,” I raised my index finger at her.

“Give me some credit,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m not T.M.-fuckin’-Z.”

Later that night, on the 11th floor of my East Houston Street hotel, Diane was there with me and she had pink champagne sent up to the room. *Exile on Main Street* was playing off a dock she’d plugged her phone into. She propped herself onto an elbow next to me.

“Look,” she said. “I don’t want you thinking I’m some kind of backstabbing bitch... But that stuff about Clara, it’s really gotta go in the piece.”

“What?!” I said. “What do you mean *gotta*? It most certainly does not!”

“Think about it,” she said. “You’ve got a singer turned on by the sound of her own voice! Like, wow! I almost don’t want to care if it’s true or not. This shit is too good! The kind of stuff legends are made of. It’s like the Stones trashing hotel rooms or something. The piece needs it.”

“She’ll sue me for slander,” I said. “How you even planning to work that into the piece, anyway? It has nothing to do with that.”

Diane shook her head. “She’ll do no such thing. Besides, it’s no slander. Down the line, she’ll probably even be grateful.”

“Grateful?”

She took a swig of champagne right out of the bottle before handing it to me. “Just because it’s in an article doesn’t mean people will believe it’s true,” she continued. “Especially her die-hard fans. It can just be one of those myths that floats out there. Rock stars live for this shit—it’s the type of thing that turns them into gods. And besides, man, who the fuck jerks off on a couch, in the middle of a workday, unless they on some level want to get caught?”

*

After Isabel had left Montreal—and in the months that followed—I got so familiar with that stretch of road between Montreal and New York. Of course I'd driven down or up that road so many times before that I'd lost count. But now I knew every I-87 rest stop by heart: which ones had a Motel 6, a Motel 8, or a Roy Rogers, and which Roy Rogerses had a Darren or Sharlene or a Denise working there. The Interstate now a second home, so to speak. But after a while, every time I'd be on that road and tired and needing a place to sleep, I'd always pull over at the same exit—one just north of Albany—time and time again. One gravitates towards habit, I guess. Call it a lack of inspiration.

And though by then his marriage to Clara was already starting to fall apart, Clay still kept his promises to me: Isabel got her SoHo art exhibition, Tony got flown in to meet Clara for the manager job. When Jay was offered a director of photography gig, however, on the set of the new Barry DeVino film to be shot in Arizona, his reaction didn't quite match the gratitude the others had expressed.

"I'm gonna have to take orders from that putz!" he yelled out coming through the door of the studio one morning, out of breath and sweat dripping down his forehead like he'd just sprinted from his doorstep.

"Which putz?" I said from behind the mixing desk.

"DeVino!"

I shrugged. "A gig's a gig, man."

But by then he'd already accepted it, and a week later Jay flew out to Phoenix. A few days after that he was already back in Montreal.

"That asshole fired me on the second day," he said to me over the phone. "I knew he was a fuckin' jackass! I called it!"

Apparently DeVino had wanted to film a timelapse of the sun over an entire day, as it rose and set over a cactus in the desert, to which Jay scoffed before asking DeVino if he was actually being serious. And so DeVino got offended that a DOP was questioning his vision and sent him home.

In the weeks that followed something changed in Jay. Things often changed in Jay but this was different. He started holding these daily streetside symposiums, where from the curb, standing on an upside down milk crate, he'd be out there ranting into a megaphone. A sort of makeshift Speakers' Corner. On some days the rants would be about potholes. On others they would be about bike lanes or Bill 101. Or even repressed Franco rights in Ontario—though his entire diatribe would be in English. People stopped to listen. The crowds even got bigger. A lot bigger, actually.

To be honest, for a moment I got worried for him, wondering if all this was still just some sort of mental break rearing its ugly head. But within a month Jay's thing would morph into a full-fledged ideology and re-organize itself as a registered municipal political party—with an independent island of Montreal the main component of the platform. Montreal independent from the rest of Quebec. Independent from the rest of Canada. A city-state of its own. That's what he was pitching.

Some of the free weeklies praised Jay's platform; the mainstream papers, however, wasted no time ridiculing the idea of him as a serious mayoral contender. The Gazette dubbed him a *Modern Duddy Kravitz* of local politics, going on about his so-called *delusions of grandeur*, told *in sound and fury*, lacking any basis in reality. La Presse printed a cartoon of Jay filming a windmill with a handheld 8mm-camera, underneath a speech bubble that had him saying, 'Make love to the camera, baby'. These were possibly the first six words of English I'd ever seen that paper put in print.

But by talking about him so much they'd somehow inadvertently breathed life into his campaign. The week after the La Presse cartoon, Jay got a six percent bump in the polls. He was

now in third place—two points shy of the *Action Montreal* leader. All this was still very early on in the race, but it meant he'd now get to be invited to city hall for some of the debates.

On the hazy, foggy evening I found out about this, I was leaving the studio, and after stopping home to pack some clothes, I took the car and headed down to New York. But only a few hours after the border, my eyes were weary from the scrim of light on the empty road getting thinner and thinner as the sky got dark, and so I pulled over for the night.

I took a right at that exit near the midway point between Montreal and New York, off the I-87 just north of Albany, with the motel built around a small lake. In the lobby as I got my key, I joked to the night manager how there was something strangely poetic about his being there every time I dropped by.

“Every few nights,” I said, “you get to witness this complete renewal of people. It’s a bit like watching the earth get wiped out and repopulated again. That’s probably how the trees feel.”

“I’m a tree in your scenario?” he laughed. “For a second there I thought you were going to say that was how God probably feels.”

“You certainly have a high opinion of yourself,” I said.

His deep guffaw echoed in the oval space of the reception area. “But wait,” he said. “If I’m, like, an old-ass tree, that would make this hotel... what? Planet Earth? What does that make you?”

“Some sort of divine presence, I suppose. A spirit. Coming round every now and then to check up on you and make sure things are going OK.”

After checking in I walked around the bend to the 24-hour Exxon station to get a pack of cigarettes and I saw the latest *Rolling Stone* there on the stand. On the walk back I lit one up while I flipped through the pages of the magazine to get to Diane’s article. She’d spared no details. It was all in there, the episode in question even referenced up there in the subheading. Comparing Clara to a siren luring herself to shipwreck further down. And though it had been written tastefully, or at least

I thought so, I felt this stab of remorse as I got to the end of it. Definitely not for Clara. Not for Clay. Not even for Isabel. That guilt I felt was for Sara for some reason.

And the next morning as I drove past the Poughkeepsie exit on that last stretch of I-87 before it hits Jersey, I wondered if Isabel would have had read the article.

“That Rolling Stone thing was a nice touch,” she said stirring her tea when I met her in a Downtown Brooklyn café that afternoon. “Any truth to it?”

“What you think?” I said.

“I don’t think you’d make something like that up,” she shrugged. “But then again what do I know?”

“It happened.”

“So what if it happened, though? Why the hell bring that up? To a reporter of all people! You trying to get back at me? Or trying to get back at her? I’m sure Clara will be pissed as hell over this.”

“Please,” I said. “I’m sure she’ll pay no mind to it. And who fuckin’ cares if Clara’s pissed, anyway.”

“She’s your client, collaborator—your friend!”

“*Was*. She was all of those things.”

“That’s awfully petty of you,” she said. “Awfully, awfully petty.” Then, after a long pause where her eyes seemed to scrutinize everyone and everything else in that café, “My lawyer told me not to meet with you,” Isabel continued. “I don’t really know why I even came.”

“Lawyer, huh?” I said. “So we really gonna do this?”

“Do what?”

“The Kramer vs. Kramer bullshit?”

“It’s not bullshit,” she said. “It’s Sara’s future. You’re the one who doesn’t want to let her come here.”

“You’re the one who wants to take her away from where she grew up. That’s on you. It’s like a burden of proof type situation.” I realized the words had come out wrong as they’d left my mouth, making very little sense, in Isabel effecting a wince as soon as they’d reached her ears. “I didn’t mean Sara’s future being bullshit, though,” I said. “I meant all this other stuff that could potentially hurt her in the process.”

“So what do you propose?” she said folding her arms. “What is it we should do, according to you?”

“I’m ready to leave most of it up to you,” I said. “As long as she stays in Montreal. Just don’t let spite be the reason you bring her to New York.”

“Spite?” she raised her voice. “You think all this is out of spite?”

“Or maybe your mother’s spite,” I said. “There’s really no point in moving Sara to New York at this stage of her life, other than maybe making a point.”

“That point being?”

“Hurting me. Obviously.”

“You really can’t see any other reasons?” she said, now looking away again. “Can you still not see the sacrifices I made by being the one who came to you in the first place? I finally have a shot at my own life here. How dare you use my wanting to hold on to that against Sara.”

Part of me wanted to say something about how that shot at her own life was now also thanks to me—but I held back. Not because I didn’t think it, at least in that moment, but I didn’t want her to accuse me of being petty again.

And as we stepped out and walked along Atlantic Avenue towards her car she kept her eyes on the heels of the foot traffic in front of her, as if to avoid all potential eye contact.

“You’re a bastard,” she then said out of nowhere. “That journalist, in that interview, she kept saying you had this magic touch that turned everything to gold. Everyone always says that about you. Clearly, she—they—don’t know you very well. Most of the things you touch also fall apart on their way to turning to gold.”

“Call it a curse,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “That’s not at all what I would call it.”

As we reached her car, she unlocked the door and pulled it open.

“What time you coming to pick up Sara tomorrow?” she said.

“First thing in the morning,” I said.

And without saying a word she nodded and got into the front seat and drove off.

I ended up taking a cab to Diane’s in Williamsburg that evening after killing too many hours in a bar left me unable to drive. She and I sat in her living room watching reality shows on MTV and drinking whiskey-and-cokes as I told her how I’d met with Isabel that afternoon.

“I forgot to tell you,” she said. “I met her last week.”

“You met Isabel?”

“We got invites to her art exhibit at work,” she said. “Through Clay, I presume. Sweet girl.”

“How was the show?”

“It was great,” she said. “Not that I know shit about paintings—but I liked it. People who seemed to know what they were talking about were raving about it, too. So she wants to take this court, huh? Poor Sara.”

“Was she there, too?”

“She was,” Diane nodded. “Running around like a spinning top. She and I chatted for a bit.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Music,” she said, a grin appearing on her lips. “What a cool kid. I didn’t think I’d ever meet anyone under ten who’d be able to hold their own in a conversation about the Ramones. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, I guess.”

“Somehow that scares me shitless.”

“Oh, and Clara was there, too.”

“And—let me guess—you spoke to her, too?”

“We exchanged a word or two,” Diane said.

“This was before or after you’d shoved a knife in her back and twisted it?”

“Before,” she laughed. “Before it went into print at least. Don’t you make a Judas out of me in all this. Your fingerprints are all over that knife, too, bud. But seriously, what you gonna do about Sara?”

“Nothing much I *can* do,” I said. “I’m going to go back to Montreal tomorrow and get a lawyer, too.”

“Could get ugly,” she said.

“I can’t let Isabel take her to New York.”

“You say it like it’s the worst place in the world. It’s not like she wants to take her to Moundhill, Alabama or something.”

“You know what I mean.”

“What if you just moved here, too?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “New York is great and all, but I also kind of hate it sometimes.”

“That’s entirely normal. It’s what every single New Yorker feels like. Who wouldn’t sometimes hate a place like this, a living organism that’s just constantly trying to spit you out, like a body rejecting an organ... Yet, you know, in the end, I still really can’t see myself living anywhere else.”

“And the rats,” I said. “Don’t forget about them. They roam around like they’ve become part of your ecosystem. It’s like you all have given up that fight...”

“Let me ask you something,” she cut me off. “Say you went to court, and you lost. Is that better than you having conceded what she wants right off the bat?”

“You saying I’m guaranteed to lose?”

“Not saying that at all.”

“Well, I suppose it’s a little better, yeah.”

“How is it better?”

“Because at least I will have tried.”

“What exactly does you trying have to do with Sara? You think she’s going to remember the effort you put into court proceedings?”

“Probably not,” I said. Then, after a pause, “So you think it’s all just a matter of pride, huh?”

“Of course not. I genuinely know you love her and want to be around to see her grow up. More than just a fuckin’ weekend a month. You probably also love your hometown and on some level want the three of you there together, like it was from the start, whether you want to admit that to yourself or not. I’m just saying, in the grand scheme of things, so what if she moves to New York? Big fuckin’ whoop. How long’s the plane ride—an hour? And like I said, you could move to New York, too. I’m sure Isabel would be cool with you seeing much more of Sara if you did.”

“And what about the studio?”

“What about it?”

“My whole career revolves around it.”

“It’s four fuckin’ walls and a bunch of old analogue machines, man,” she said. “I’m not saying this for the sake of flattery, but the most valuable thing in that studio is you, and you can take that with you anywhere you want. Bands would fly you all over to work with them. Or they’d fly to

you wherever you are. And besides, who you recording at Park Lane these days that's so precious to you? That's so damn worth holding on to?"

"So that's what you think I should do? Close up shop and move to New York?"

"That's your business," she said arms aloft. "I can't answer that one for you. But if for the three of you, happiness depends on your being close to each other, you and Isabel have a responsibility towards each other. And one of you has to make the sacrifice."

"And you think it's my turn to make that sacrifice—is what you're saying here."

"Just my two cents," she said. "Take it or leave it."

*

I'd been making a record with *Mucus Operandi*, a band from Ottawa I'd thought sounded like honest and unpretentious punk rock when I'd first heard their demos, but when I used that word—punk—to describe their songs, the MOs spurned the moniker, insisting with a snarl that they were not *punk* but in fact a branch of *post-music*, and this without the slightest hint of irony.

I had just wrapped up my last tracking session with them and was putting away cables and microphones when Wa Lapli called, reminding me that there was a debate on that night, asking if I wanted to catch it with him.

“Catch the debate?” I said, puzzled. I'd seen bars in the area sometimes screen federal elections, or even American elections, but I'd never seen anyone televise the mayoral ones, let alone this early in the campaign.

“Nah, nah, nah,” Wa said. “I got us passes for the live event. Meet me at Max's Tavern on St. Paul at 7. We'll have a few beers and walk up to City Hall.”

“OK,” I said. “If you say so.”

And so as it spat down a cold summer rain, I cabbied it to Old Montreal to meet Wa. Wa had not long before that become my partner at the studio. As I'd been turning down major label artists requesting to work with me, and instead made records for broke indie bands yet again, though I was quite content with that this time around, things could get pretty quiet. And so when Wa had told me he'd been looking for a new space, to move his gear and work out of, I told him I'd be happy to share my studio with him. More than anything I guess I wanted the company.

Wa was sitting on his own when I walked down the steps into Max's, his keys and a pouch of rolling tobacco and an 80-ounce pitcher of beer on a round glass table that wobbled as soon as he took his elbow off it to shake my hand. As I sat down he removed the umbrella leaning against my

chair and put it under his. I briefed him on my exchange with Mucus Operandi as he poured me a glass of beer.

“Post-music?” he shook his head. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ, guy. For real?”

From the pouch of tobacco he pulled out a rolled joint and asked me if I wanted to smoke it with him out back before the debate started. And so I followed him to the alleyway. He lit it up as we stood underneath a fire escape, half-sheltered from the rain. He took a couple of puffs and passed it to me, and as rain drops spattered off the staircase and down his neck, he retreated under the doorway with such cat-like urgency. I couldn’t help but laugh at the irony—his rapper name meaning *king of rain* in Haitian Creole—coughing into my fist after the first puff, struggling to catch my breath after that.

“Why you laughing?” he said. “I’m being fuckin’ rained on here, guy.”

“*Wa Lapli*,” I sang the intro to one of his early singles. “*Roi d’la mother-fuckin’ pluie*.”

“Get the fuck outta here, man,” he laughed.

We then finished our pitcher and traipsed up the Main to city hall.

The most surreal thing about the debate was how much Jay’s French had improved over the last year. Unbelievably so. Going from non-existent to quasi-fluency in less than twelve months. The debate was in both languages, and he’d managed to egg the other leaders on and get them to attack his lack of bilingualism before letting his French manifest itself. It was a clever ruse. They all fell for it. They were stunned when he did. I remember Wa looking at me like what the fuck just happened. The highlight of the night was without a doubt when the *Projet Montréal* leader, incumbent mayor, his hand up with the palm out, his face going for the stern look of a fed-up parent, said to Jay how enough was enough, how he’d had his fun but that it was now time for him to go to his room and let the grown-ups discuss the important matters; Jay responded by saying that, now, now, seeing how most voters were left out of the room when the *adults*—the incumbent mayor and the

provincial liberals—sat down to collude over kickbacks in healthcare, closed doors seemed to be the one recurring theme in his campaign, and so maybe the adults weren't to be trusted in this case. His answer got a standing ovation. Wa's reaction, rising to his feet and belting out a prolonged O sound into his fist, was something more suited for game-seven overtime than a mayoral debate.

When I met with lawyer Patrick Vadeboncoeur a few days later in his cushy thirty-first floor Place Ville-Marie office, he made it clear that if we wanted any realistic shot at winning this case, we'd need to *play hardball*. His round specs too small for his head he paced around the room stomping heel first onto the polished hardwood, as if to delay what it was he wanted to say.

“Come on, Pat. What's on your mind?” I said.

“You're not gonna like it,” he said.

Isabel's lawyer was going to make it look like I had no business raising a child, he said, and according to Pat, we not only had to demonstrate this wasn't true, which I guess already had its challenges, but also had to somehow show that it was in fact Isabel who was the unfit parent. He sat back down on his swiveling chair, the momentum forcing a pivot till his body was almost sideways to me, and then he repositioned himself back to centre.

“Tell me a bit more about the time around when she lost the baby,” he said taking a sip from his coffee mug. “How did she act in the months afterwards? Any signs of depression?”

“You've gotta be kidding.”

“We have to explore our options,” Vadeboncoeur shrugged.

“Do you really expect me to use that against her?”

“If you don't want to,” he said, “that's up to you and I'll respect your decision.”

I nodded, stood up, headed for the door.

“Please remember,” he added with a hint of asperity. “That when the time comes to drag you down as a dead-beat dad, she will have no problem at all throwing you under the bus.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because that’s just the way these things go,” he said. “Trust me on that.”

Without a precise destination in mind I went walking that morning, and I kept walking more than I think I’d ever walked in a single day. First I went up the Main towards Mile-End, passing Leonard’s old home off Parc du Portugal, whistling the melody to *Last Year’s Man* as I observed the handmade additions to the Marie-Anne street sign—*So Long* above it—*And Leonard* underneath—still not taken down by the city. For once I was endeared by the city’s laxness. For letting it stay there all this time. It even made me smile. And as I passed the corner I remembered seeing Leonard leave that Portuguese grocery store there when I was a kid, his hands weighed down by his bags, and as someone walking up the street wished him a good morning, addressing him as Mr. Cohen, Leonard put his groceries down and doffed his hat and wished the man the same. There’s this saying in Montreal, that you only become a true Montrealer once you’ve had your first Leonard sighting. I wondered what that meant for future generations. Sara’s generation.

And I walked up to Fairmount and knocked on Jay’s door, hoping to drag him out for a drink and seek his council, but he wasn’t home, and so I sat down on a patio on my own and ordered a beer I then drank watching people go by. And then I walked some more, with the Cure in my headphones, and I started thinking about how some people found some music depressing, wondering why that was, wondering if they failed to see how sadness was sometimes a beacon when transmitted and received. How that could make someone smile.

When Patrick Vadeboncoeur and Anne Ducharme engaged in round one of our proxy war, there were times when I worried that if they both presented cases too convincing, neither one of us would go home with Sara. Sometimes Isabel and I would make accidental eye contact in the

courtroom, and I wondered if she'd come to that realization, too. Vadeboncoeur spoke first and from the start I felt like interrupting him and calling the whole thing off. But instead I just tuned out and tried to think about other things. Trying to stick to my own frequency the best I could. I couldn't stop looking at Isabel, though, studying her face for the slightest sign of discomfort, noticing her looking back at me out of the corner of her eye, hoping she'd tuned herself out, too.

My thoughts wandered. To all the highs and lows, both inevitable in a life with a partner. The little things. Trips to Havana. Parking tickets. Dealing with inflated gas bills in winter months. That sort of thing. Gymnastics medals. Covering cuts and scrapes from the balance beam with Smurf band-aids. Kissing it all better. True elation is a complicated thing. More than just a selfish drive to feel good about yourself. More than just wanting and needing and deciding on a whim that at that particular moment that's what you want and need in your life and dragging with it ten years of someone else's, hording their vulnerability to one day use as ammo, doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again.

Vadeboncoeur was mouthing words I didn't quite catch as I meandered through more memories, doing my best to curb the awful feelings they'd provoked. At that point, I just wanted out. But soon enough Vadeboncoeur was done talking and I took a deep breath before it was Ducharme's turn. And before she'd even opened her mouth I looked over at Isabel, who looked back at me, and I decided that, whatever the consequences would be, she and I would never step into a courtroom again.

No verdict had yet been reached, but the next morning, with still another week to go before the next court date, Sara was already enrolled to start the third grade in New York. I woke up and it was raining an almost torrential rain, obliquely falling and pelting the skylight in clumps, sloping off the bedroom dormer window. The house was full of boxes inaptly wrapped in 3M tape and labeled in Sharpie marker, and outside Sunday morning stood very still. The doorbell rang, and through the

white see-through drapes I saw Isabel's car by the curb with its flashers on. I invited her to come inside and she noticed the boxes and asked what all that was about, and I told her I'd found a place closer the studio. For now. Making no mention of the fact that I didn't want to live in the house we'd shared. Selling it as convenience. She sat down and I made us coffee, and as she told me she had just come by to get some of her clothes and bring them to New York, I listened as she talked; her voice quivered, both undulating and a touch flat. I kissed her to make it stop, which caught her off guard, and she sat there with her eyes closed as if to muster the energy to stand up and walk away; instead she pushed me onto my back and started kissing me, too, on my lips and my face and my neck, before pulling me up the stairs towards the bedroom, undoing my belt in the hallway, and I flipped her dress over her head as we tumbled onto the bed. We made love, the whole time studying each other's most minute facial expressions, surrendering to warm and familiar touch, underneath the whirr of the ceiling fan, the strange midday dun matching the colour of curtains, and us finding all that was there still untainted and unmarred, if only for a moment, our bodies canvassed and capsized.

Sitting up on the bed and chain-smoking Gauloises cigarettes we reminisced about such scenes we'd lifted from French black and white arthouse cinema on warm nights in New York way back, dark clouds lingering above our heads, and us motionless, naked and tangled in the linen sheets.

"You just wanted for it to be like that forever?" she said. "Isn't it?" Her head was down as if dreading answers to the question that had just parted her lips.

"How can you say that?"

"Just a hunch," she shrugged. "One I've had since day one."

"I love you," I said. "I love Sara."

“I’m not saying you don’t,” she said. “There were just times I felt like I was a burden on you. Like we were both a burden on you. Like you’d wanted it both ways.”

“Both ways how?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Whatever freedom you had before we had Sara. The life we had together afterwards. As if you felt you were caught in the middle somehow. Not completely happy here, not completely happy there.”

“No one is ever *completely* happy.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why are you only telling me this now?”

“It’s not like it’s the easiest thing to bring up.” She paused to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “And another thing that hit me,” she continued. “Something I want to admit, rather. After the miscarriage, yes I was sad. Depressed. Absolutely devastated. I didn’t even know how to tell you. I was dreading it. I felt like I was the failure. What made me feel ever worse is that I kept thinking about Sara and her accident, and how had she not, God forbid, made it, we’d have lost not one but two children, in which case I imagine it would’ve been only a matter of time till you’d bolted. Like it was, paradoxically, the only thing keeping you there.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “And as far as Sara goes, let’s not think in those hypotheticals, please. We’ve been through enough.”

“OK,” she nodded.

“About the case,” I said stroking the same strand of hair that had popped over her ear again back down by her right shoulder. “I’m sorry all that had to happen.”

“Plenty more nastiness to come, I’m sure,” she contrived a smile.

“No,” I said. “I’m done with that. Whatever arrangement you want is fine with me.”

She tilted her head back and looked up at me, the green of her irises glistening back at me.

“Really?”

“Dead serious,” I said.

“Why?”

The way she then looked at me I wondered if she'd felt betrayed by how easily I'd just given up Sara, without even a proper fight, and if that would somehow just reinforce her beliefs about me wanting out all along, but then I felt awful for letting myself think so little of her in that moment. But how do you tell someone that it's because you feel sorry for them? That as painful as this is for you, you'll be OK somehow. And if you're not, then you're OK with that, too. That they need each other more than you need them. Not because you don't love them, or because of any mother-daughter bond thing, or any other reason than that you feel this is just how it should be.

“Because I don't want to do that anymore ever again,” I said.

“I don't want to do that either,” she said.

The next morning I was woken up by Isabel joggling my shoulder. She was wearing a navy tube top and her hair was damp, her eyeliner winged like she was in a hurry to go. She pointed to the coffee and biscuits she'd left me on the bedside table, and kissed me on the cheek before saying we'd speak again soon.

That same morning I called Vadeboncoeur and told him that we'd decided to drop the whole thing.

*

Driving up that open stretch of Interstate about a month later—just past the part where you cross over the Hudson one last time—with the window cracked and *Greetings from Asbury Park* blasting out the speakers, I was feeling good, reminded of days I'd drive long, absurd distances—just because I could. How I'd driven from Montreal to South Carolina in one shot. I felt so good, in fact, that I wondered whether I should get over myself and start accepting some higher-profile projects again, but maybe I'd settled that question on my own by wondering about it for too long, because requests slowly stopped coming in at some point, because as far as the mainstream music biz is concerned, like Wa says, you're it until you ain't no more, and when you ain't, there's rarely a way back.

That's what I thought was happening at least. Not that I had to worry about cash—I'd still have cheques coming in from Clara and the Streams till Sara was out of college at least—and that's not even counting Portal. Which maybe was part of the problem, I thought. I'd see bands coming in to make their first records, often fuelled by that hunger and desperation and naivety that often define great first albums. That uncertainty in it. Not knowing how you'll feed yourself or make rent. Not knowing whether this was your last shot at doing something great before calling it quits and seeing if Via Rail was hiring. Or not knowing how much time you had left, whether you even had enough to finish what you'd started, just desperately trying to get it out of your system. In a way it's a sad thing that it can really only happen once, because while you're there you can't appreciate it, but then say you're one of the lucky ones who get to carry on making records for a living, then that hunger goes away, and sometimes you end up wishing you could tap back into that hunger again, without actually being broke, but it's not going to happen. Maybe it comes back in certain stages of your life, in diminishing amounts, until one day you notice that what was once rebellion against the monotony of a nine-to-five grind becomes exactly that. It becomes routine. Seven microphones on

the drum kit—every single time. Asking if you can get a kick while you twiddle with the EQ. You're not doing it for the money, but not for the love of it, either, and so you wonder why you're even doing it at all.

I spent the first part of that winter up in our cabin in Morin Heights. That's where I was when I heard about the Streams' Grammy nomination—for Album of the Year. And one morning about a week after that I woke up to a message from a film company in the UK. They wanted to shoot a documentary about the making of *Tumbleweeds* and asked if they could come get a few shots of the studio and a few quotes from me. I called them back, told them they were welcome to come by but that I'd already said all I had to say about the album. It was still nice to know people cared.

And after the lull of the holiday season I started getting requests to produce again—from bigger names than I'd expected—and I thought maybe I'd been hard on myself, but I still couldn't muster the energy to phone any of them back. I'd also yet again blown off the invite to attend the Grammys.

Like most recluses I found myself sometimes toying with the idea of finding company as a way to fight the boredom, while at the same time dreading the idea of succeeding, and I'd wander down to a bar off the 329 and sit there surrounded by snowboarders and truckers and hard-boiled men in biker jackets who looked like they were there hiding from something or someone, and I'd watch the Habs roll through their annual January slump. I'd sit there till the game ended and walk back up to the cabin. Roll a spliff and smoke it. Fry up some bacon and eat it in a sandwich.

One night at the bar the roughest-looking biker there, who had a nametag that said *Destro*, played *Sandcastles*, the slowest, most melancholic track off *Tumbleweeds*, on the jukebox and started swaying to it with his eyes closed. I was stunned to see him mouth the words.

“*Qu'est-cé que tu r'gardes, l'barbu?*” he snapped as he opened as his eyes and intercepted my stare.

I started playing the vinyl back at the cabin and remembered just how good a record it was—how much I'd put into it. How much Jenn had. Everything she had. I even started thinking that maybe it wouldn't be so awful to attend the Grammys. For her.

"But you hate awards shows," Tony said when I called to tell him I was considering the idea. "The Grammys more than any of them! You know none of the Streams are even going, right?"

"That's kind of why I want to be there," I said.

"They might ask you to have a few words ready if ever it wins!" he laughed. "You do realize that?"

Yes—I'd always hated the Grammys—but times had changed since I was growing up. There was no such thing as selling out anymore. That idea died with Y2K. You had to promote—shamelessly if necessary—and you had to get paid. That's what I told myself at least.

I was feeling no better when I got to Los Angeles than I did in Morin Heights. My plan was to get in and get out. No lavish pre or post parties in the hills at Diddy's or anything like that.

The afternoon before the ceremony I sat at the hotel bar pacing my way through glasses of Sauvignon Blanc, reading about Clara and Clay's separation and her fucking off to Marseilles with a Finnish filmmaker, and her *opening up* about the difficulties of a celebrity marriage. I finished my wine and cabbled it to the Staples Center, arriving early so to beat as much of the red carpet bullshit as I could, sneaking in a plastic flask full of Jameson in my coat pocket, the place a dry house and everyone in there sober as a judge, and four hours of that being a lot to bear when you've been drinking all afternoon—not to mention it being the fuckin' Grammys and that alone a lot to stomach.

Throughout the evening, tucked away at the back, I sipped my flask. The band who won *Best New Artist* had been around for almost a decade, won the award for their fourth record. Fuckin'

absurd. And when they finally announced the nominees for *Album of the Year* I took a swig, in my head dedicating it to Jenn, because no way it was going to the Streams.

“The award for Album of the Year,” the pair on stage announced, peaking at the contents of the envelope together. “*Tumbleweeds*,” they said in unison. “The Illegal Streams.”

I was staring at the ground between my feet as the room roared. I stashed the flask under the seat in front of me and stood up, realizing I was sitting so far back it would take me forever to get to the stage. And so I quickened my pace, and about halfway down the aisle a spotlight found me, tracking my way up to the stage.

“Ladies and gentleman of the Academy,” I said as I took to the podium, the trophy clasped in my hands. “And all of you watching at home... First and foremost, thank you, on behalf of Jenn and The Illegal Streams, thank you for making *Tumbleweeds* Album of the Year.

“I realize it’s somewhat customary around here to begin these speeches by thanking God,” I went on, “but I’m sure we can all agree his work this year has left a lot to be desired. Otherwise I wouldn’t be the one up here right now.” I wanted to make a crack about how I was almost expecting God to come up during the artists-we-lost-this-year segment, but I held back after the previous line had fallen so flat. So, “Working with Jenn over the years,” I continued, “has been the crowning achievement of my career. I can’t describe the pride I feel when I think about playing a role in first getting her music heard. Jenn could open her mouth and sing a single note and immediately you’d be reminded of the immensity of the power that music has on you—reminded why you got into it in the first place.

“Those of you who met her and saw her play know she was a talent as raw and pure as they come... And those of you who knew her personally... also know she’d never have accepted to come up here tonight.”

On the plane over to Los Angeles the day before, I was talking with the woman sitting next to me and I told her about how I was going to the Grammys. About the possibility of coming up and saying a few words about a wonderful, gifted friend—a friend gone too soon. At one point I scribbled something on my napkin, and the woman turned to me. Pointing to the napkin, she said, “Is that the million-dollar speech you’re working on there?”

At the time I didn’t think the Streams even had a shot at the award, no matter how good it was, so I shook my head and told her that no, I hadn’t written it yet. But the way she’d phrased that question got me thinking.

“Don’t you worry,” she then said. “If you’re called up there, I’m sure inspiration will hit, and you’ll come up with all the right things to say.”

And the morning of the ceremony, Tony had called me from Montreal and asked me the same thing—if I’d written a speech. When I told him I hadn’t, he said, “Just make sure you don’t swear. Down there the F.C.C. charges twenty-five grand per f-bomb,” he laughed. “A hundred and twenty-five grand if said f-bomb is used as a verb. Bono learned that the hard way. Not that he can’t afford it.” I promised I’d watch my mouth. I hung up the phone in my hotel room and thought about what I’d say up there if need be. Then I decided that what was important was that I said what Jenn would’ve said if she were in the room that night.

“If Jenn were standing here next to me tonight,” I continued my speech. “First and foremost, she would’ve called me a sellout for getting involved with something like Portal.

“She would’ve reminded us all how easy it is to sell one’s integrity. And how hard and costly it is to buy it back. How does one buy it back? That’s the million dollar question, I guess.”

And at this point I paused, looking straight at the musicians in the pit, hoping to catch them in a moment of distraction; they were all staring right back at me.

“And fuck the mainstream,” I yelled out. “She would’ve said that, too! Fuck the F.C.C. and fuck their fines. Fuck Malware Records. Fuck Portal. Fuck the Grammys. Fuck awards shows. Fuck the Academy for only recognizing me now that I’m fuckin’ dead! That’s what she would’ve said.”

As bedlam ensued among the musicians in the pit, I knew I only had a few moments left before I’d get rolled out by the credits and drowned by the sound of strings.

“For Jenn,” I said lifting the award up above my head. “Thank you. Have a great night.” Leaving the award on the podium I took three steps back, waving to a crowd divided equally between cheers and jeers and dumbfounded faces, before turning around and walking off stage.

As soon as I got backstage part of me regretted what I’d done. A drunken speech in front of twenty-five million people, during the last and most prestigious award of the night, was already bad enough—even without the seven-figure fine bound to ensue. But that wasn’t the worst of it. I imagined my daughter watching the show.

The reporters backstage crowded the hallway and I had to fight my way through, ignoring their microphones shoved in my face, till I’d reached the fire exit at the end; luckily the door didn’t set off any alarms, I thought at the time, and I found myself behind the Staples Center, lighting a cigarette, quietly walking to where the alleyway meets South Figueroa Street. And after cabbing it back to the hotel I sat down at the bar, hangdog and doubled over asking the bartender for a double Scotch on the rocks, which the manager brought over himself, putting it down on a coaster in front of me. I looked up trying to avoid eye contact as I thanked him but it was in vain. He knew who I was.

But as he looked at me his eyes were wide and beaming.

“On the house, man,” he said. “That was just about the coolest shit I’ve ever seen happen at the Grammys.”

*

The next day I was back at the studio in Montreal recounting the events of the previous evening to Wa when Isabel called. No one other than Wa and Tony knew I'd be going to the Grammys, but she'd obviously seen what had happened. I mean, everyone had.

"*You* went to the Grammys?" Isabel said on the other end of the line.

"Is that the part you find the most surprising in all this?" I asked. "That I merely attended? Did you even watch it?"

"Of course I watched it," she said. "What on earth got into you?"

I tried to think of an answer. "Beats me," I said. "Guess I wanted to be there in case Jenn won."

"Not that," she said. "The speech!"

"Somehow it felt right in the moment."

"Never thought I'd see you set foot at an awards show," she said. "Let alone step up there and do *that* in front of millions of people... But listen—I can't talk long—that's not why I'm calling... I have a huge favour to ask."

She'd been asked to take part in an art exhibition in Paris the following week. Some Corsican surrealist had pulled out last minute and they asked her to fill in. Her mom was in Florida and she wanted to know if I could look after Sara for a whole week.

Rumbling came from the open door of the storage locker; Wa was searching for a blank tape. The latest shipment was late and due to arrive any day now.

"Sure I'll watch her," I said. "Congrats on the gig by the way."

"Thanks," she said. "I'll owe you. You can catch me up on all the Grammy gossip when I see you."

I asked her how one got paintings to Paris and she said that it was by plane, obviously. When I hung up the phone, Wa was on the floor holding a box of tape with a neon green inscription on it.

“*Dog Whistle Experiment?*” he said. “Never heard of them.”

I laughed. “Don’t tell me you don’t know *Dog Whistle Experiment?*”

He looked back at me shaking his head. “Should I?”

“Local masterpiece, man.”

“Oh yeah? What do they sing?”

“Play the tape,” I said. “You’ll see.”

After tossing it on the tape machine he hit the play button, sitting back down on the floor as pops and rumbles of room noise that’d made it onto the recording started up on the speakers. Then, nothing. And a few minutes later the only thing you could hear was someone huffing and puffing on the other end.

“Man, the fuck we listening to?” a puzzled Wa threw his hands up in the air. I was shaking trying to contain my laughter. “Is this just someone playing an actual dog whistle?” he asked.

“What did you think it was?”

“A band,” he said. “Obviously. With a hipster name like that. Guy, why would you use a whole tape to record a fuckin’ dog whistle?”

“Sara got one in her Christmas stocking one year,” I explained. “A silent one. To us humans at least. She liked playing with the neighbour’s husky. She lost the whistle almost immediately, and found it again one day years later when we were moving. Anyway, we explained to her all about dogs hearing frequencies humans couldn’t. And so one day we’re at home and *Sgt. Pepper*—original—pressing—is playing on the record player... And you know that whole chaotic bit at the end of *A Day in the Life*?

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever tried playing it for your dog?”

“Have I ever tried playing *Sgt. Pepper* for my dog, man?” Wa said. “Is that what you’re asking me? No, I have not tried playing an original pressing of *Sgt. Pepper* for my dog.”

“Well John had this idea at the time,” I continued. “They threw in a police dog whistle in that bit. So when I told Sara that, she asked me how come we could hear that one but couldn’t hear hers. And so I gave a six-year-old a crash course on how frequencies worked, and how there were more than one type of dog whistle, and I explained how even what she heard in *A Day in the Life* was still probably not the same thing a dog would hear.

“She sat there listening quietly for a bit and then left the room, and when she came back she was holding the whistle, telling me she had an idea. ‘What’s your idea?’ I asked. And she said she wanted to make an album only dogs could hear. So that when we got a dog, the pup would have something to listen to without bothering the humans.”

“What a good kid,” Wa said.

“So we come down to the studio and I record her playing a silent dog whistle for about three minutes before she’s out of breath from blowing into it on and off for so long. She comes down to the control room and we listen to the playback. And she must’ve gotten confused somewhere in my explanation because she was expecting to be able to hear it now that it had been recorded. ‘Can’t hear a thing,’ she said, and as she can’t hear very well from her right ear, she shuffled over and repositioned herself to have her left ear facing the speakers, thinking that was why she couldn’t hear anything.”

“Damn,” he said. “I was gonna ask you if I could record over it. Seeing I have a session tomorrow and we have no tape reels left. But you know, never mind...” Wa put the tape back in the box. “Dog Whistle Experiment is a pretty good name for a band, though,” he said.

*

Back when Isabel had only just moved to Montreal, during her first spring and summer there, she and I would walk to Mount-Royal on Sundays when it was warm, often taking long detours on the way so that I could show her parts of the city she hadn't yet seen. One time we climbed up to the Westmount Belvedere, and once at the top I told her about Mark Twain coming to the city in the 1800s and nicknaming it *the city of a hundred bell towers*.

“*La ville des cent clochers*,” she said looking in the direction of the canal, trying to spot one somewhere.

“He probably didn't say it in French,” I said.

“Sounds prettier, though.”

Everywhere you looked that day, spring was there gleaming back at you, shimmering off the flowing St. Lawrence, sheening off the crowns of tall trees on the Murray Hill slope, off the Montreal Trust building, under miles of unbroken blue, bright on Isabel's exposed shoulders, her skin already tan that early in the year.

When we made it to the park, we set an off-white picnic blanket with scalloped edges on a patch of grass and ate roast beef on rye sandwiches sipping refilled bottles of Evian we'd frozen overnight to keep cold throughout the day. Witnessing the array of the fucked-up that is a Sunday on the mount—the warring medieval factions parading with their giant sticks of bamboo or the furtive looks of drug dealers or what not—she asked me, pausing in the middle of her question to light a cigarette, what I'd miss most if I'd ever have to leave this place.

“Probably this right here,” I said resting on an elbow on the blanket. “The late spring. Only time of year where you're not freezing or dying of heat. The only respite from the real seasons. The kind of weather you don't know is even there...”

“So, you’d miss... the weather?”

“It’s the lack thereof...” I insisted.

On the blanket she lay prone, aching in a little hole in the earth probably dug up by insects.

“What about you?” I asked. “What is it you miss most about New York?”

“My mom,” she said first off without hesitation. “My brother. My friend Rebecca. Jane, too—sometimes. My dad—to some extent.” Then, after a pause, “People, mostly. Maybe I haven’t yet been gone long enough to miss *things*.”

With her sunglasses on I couldn’t tell exactly where she was looking, but it seemed to be somewhere over my head. She then pointed in the direction of the cross on top of the mountain.

“Does that thing light up at night?” she said. “I can’t even remember.”

“The cross?” I said. “Sometimes.”

“It’s kind of odd to have a lit cross overlook a city, no? Why do you even have that?”

I shrugged. “The Irish?”

“You just made that up.”

“I did,” I said. “But they did have this thing back in Ireland where the cross had to be the highest point in a city.”

“But this cross was originally planted by?”

“The French, I think.”

“In?”

“The 17th century.”

“And the Irish came here...”

“Much, much later.”

“So what do the Irish have to do with it?”

“Well, the Irish all settled in areas like Griffintown,” I said. “Just down the hill from here,” I pointed. “And on cloudy days the cross was too far to see... so, you know, they had to light it up.”

“Fuck off,” she slapped me on the shoulder.

Nearby a kid in a crimson cut-off clomped his way downslope a craggy path, then using his momentum he turned sideways, raising a bloom of dust and sliding down the rest of it as would a snowboarder at the end of a run.

“*Mary Gallagher of Griffintown*,” I sang the line off the recent debut Bells of Passion EP.

“Who now?” Isabel said swatting at the dust cloud.

“Mary Gallagher,” I said. “She was a whore who got her head chopped off. In the 1800s, this other prostitute—Susan Kennedy—got jealous of Mary’s successful... enterprise... and chopped Mary’s head off with an axe. As Mary slept, I believe. And the myth has it that Mary comes round the corner of William and Murray, in Griffintown, every year looking for her head.”

“Another Montreal myth,” she took off her sunglasses as if to show me the emphatic roll of eyes. “So many things in this city seem to be either based on—or elevated to—some bloody iconic status, or superstition, or myth.”

“For example?” I asked.

“Like... that goalie you showed me who jumps over the line thing because if he doesn’t they’re gonna lose or something.”

“Athletes don’t count—they’re all superstitious. What else?”

“Well, from what I gather the Habs alone have at least a trillion examples.”

“Well, hockey aside, then.”

“Like, that there’s probably about, I don’t know, five thousand people in this park, and every single one I bet you knows the exact house where Leonard Cohen lives, and yet you’re all like, ‘Oh

my God I once saw him walking down the street eating a bagel and cream cheese like a mere mortal. Best day of my fuckin' life.”

I laughed.

“Or like that even something like the spices at Schwartz’s deli have a backstory. That thing you showed me on the wall. About that employee in the ’40s sick of eating the free shit they’d give to staff day in day out, coming in on said day, inventing the *mother of all spices*... Or those postcards we saw of the guy who used to haul buses on the Plateau. What’s his name?”

“The strongman? Louis Cyr. That was Little Burgundy—not the Plateau.”

“No, no. Not him,” she said. “The Yugoslav immigrant. Homeless guy.”

“The Great Antonio,” I said. “I forgot about him.”

“There you go. The *Great Antonio*. Case in point. But I mean, there’s way more. The other day I was looking at paintings in the Westmount Square art gallery, and I saw a framed black and white photo of *Chez Parée* from, like, the ’50s, selling for \$1500—like it’s the damn strip club Hall of Fame or something. Then you’ve got the Saint this and *Sainte* that. The cross up there. Still waiting for your baseball team to return one day. T-shirts immortalizing that flashing flour brand sign that always has half the letters missing.” Sitting up she dusted the grass off her cherry-red accordion skirt. “I really could keep going,” she added. “Y’all bloody mythologize everything.”

“Wait, now,” I said. “You’re trying to tell me New Yorkers don’t? I could cite a trillion cases.”

“Maybe we do,” she said. “It comes from a different place, though... I can’t explain it.”

She didn’t finish that thought, most likely because she didn’t want to offend me or the city I’d grown up in, but it’s like I knew what she was thinking—how the cross was somehow symbolic of the chip on the city’s shoulder or something. On my back I stared at the sky as predatory birds

started circling over the park, most likely mistaking the tens of thousands bodies lying there almost motionless for corpses in a battlefield.

I thought about all this as I spent afternoons alone in Prospect Park while Sara was at school and Isabel in Paris. I'd bring a book to read as I'd sit there on the bench but after every page or two my thoughts would wander off and I'd end up putting it down. Sometimes you realize that the most precious things you have are the things that keep you from overthinking, because when you have too much time to think your mind inevitably ends up drifting to some of the precious things you no longer have.

It was March and the ground in New York looked like it had already thawed a long time ago. Isabel's car had stayed parked on the street that week and I'd moved it from one side to the other on both Tuesday and Thursday. And every time I walked back to Isabel's apartment with Sara after picking her up from school, Sara would point and say how it was *mommy's car*.

When Isabel came back from Paris she looked like she'd crossed the Atlantic on a month-long journey at the mercy of the high seas.

"I spent the entire flight back puking in a little bag," she said. "And it was probably one of the highlights of my trip."

"Ouch."

"Paris itself was lovely," she said throwing her handbag on the couch. "But I've never seen a higher concentration of creeps as I did at that art exhibit."

"That bad?"

"That bad."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not right now," she shook her head and sank into the couch. "But if you could fix me a real stiff drink, that'd be real swell of you."

Hearing her voice Sara erupted into the living room beaming and wide-grinned. I fixed Isabel and me each a Scotch and brought them over.

“Why’s mine twice as big as yours?” she said when I handed her the glass. “You trying to get me wasted?”

“I was gonna head back tonight.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “The sun’s already down. Stay the night.”

And so we sat there drinking whiskey with the cool breeze wafting the spring scents from the park in through the open windows, and as Sara ran circles in and out every room of the apartment Isabel told me all about the red tape and pomp of the money-to-burn French aristocracy, and how Parisian men were creeps, and how—scratch that—*all* men were creeps but the Parisian ones having a special *je-ne-sais-quoi* about them when they decided they were going to be creeps; but how it was sometimes possible to find some respite, though usually not for long, that it often came in the form of cold beer under long white awning on a quiet Marais sidestreet, or in the form of dusk settling over Victor Hugo’s house in *Place Des Vosges*, the place itself something worth writing about, she pointed out, just as long as the person writing it resisted the urge to digress into 40-page descriptions of Guernsey winds.

Once Sara was in bed we sat back on the living room couch drinking and talking some more, and I told her how she’d been in a dream of mine the night before—though, not exactly *in it*, but as a presence through her absence—until she fell asleep, still sitting upright; and as I leaned over to reach for a blanket and cover her she rested her head on my chest and I collapsed into the couch and remained there under the weight of her body till morning.

“What time is it?” I heard her say at some point.

I opened my eyes and saw the morning manifest itself only through a speck at the end of the hallway.

“Still early,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

“I need to make Sara her lunch,” she said.

“It’s Saturday,” I said.

She turned her head and looked back at me and smiled that touch-cock-eyed smile that always managed to make me forget everything but the present moment. “So it is,” she said.

*

A week before the municipal election there'd been an attempt to smear Jay and his campaign. Your typical last-minute tactics. A Mile End laundromat owner who'd cut Jay a thousand-dollar cheque back at his first fundraiser had been busted for—of all things—laundering money, using his laundromat as a front. And they tried to somehow tie Jay into the whole thing. But it didn't really matter by then. It's not like the outcome would've been so different.

No one could really explain why Jay's numbers had started to slip when they did. It was like he'd been out of the news for a week and all of a sudden people lost interest. If anything maybe the laundromat thing ended up giving him a bump because it reminded people he was still around.

I was walking around Mile End with Isabel and Sara the day before the municipal election and we saw a campaign poster where someone had turned Jay's face into Che Guevera using red and black marker, with Jay's head now donning the military-style beret with the red star on the crown. It was hard to tell whether the defacing was in support or protest.

It was raining hard when we looked out the window the next morning, rising to the sound of Sara belting out the top-end of her soprano register after she'd seen a large bug, in the process probably waking up half of Waverly Street. Months back, Jay had reserved a dive bar on Park Avenue as his election day HQ. And so later that day after dropping Sara off at a sitter on Esplanade, Isabel and I scuttled over to the bar on Park in the rain. And when we arrived Jay wasn't even there. The only customers in the place were Wa and the man in the feathered hat you'd see around Mile End in those days. Wa sat at a table, and the other man was by the slot machines in the corner, counting change in his hand.

"Where is everybody?" Wa said as he saw us walk in.

"Don't worry," I said. "They'll show. I promise."

“You think?” Wa asked.

“Without a doubt,” I said. “Though maybe not for Jay. The Habs game starts in a couple of hours.”

“Don’t be so cynical,” Isabel said.

We ordered drinks from the waitress and she brought them over. Jay walked in not long after that. Wa rose to his feet to greet him with a one-man standing-o and signaled the waitress to bring him a drink. She brought him a pint and disappeared to a back room.

Jay raised his glass. “Kids, this right here is why you should never get involved in politics.”

Wa’s hearty laugh resonated past the row of slots to the man in the feathered hat sitting on the last stool, who turned and acknowledged us with a nod.

Isabel was looking around the room. “Where’s the rest of your, you know, team?” she asked.

“What team?” Jay said. “There were like two other people working on this and they quit last week.”

“So much for loyalty.”

“What you gonna do, hey?” he shrugged.

“Don’t look so glum,” I said. “Aren’t we here to celebrate?”

Jay gave a sardonic woohoo.

“I’ll get us some champagne,” I said and went to find the waitress.

She brought it over and popped the cork. Wa then poured it into six even glasses, offering one to the waitress and one to the man in the feathered hat.

“That’s some fine pouring,” Jay said observing the evenness.

“You’re just saying that ’cause you’ve never seen me pour champagne outside a rap video before,” Wa said. “You probably expected me to pour this shit straight down your mouth or something.”

“That’s not why I said that, Wa.”

A group of five or six came in as we knocked glasses and they sat down at a table in the opposite corner. Minutes later, five or six more, and not long after that the coverage started. The first time the numbers appeared on screen, they had Jay at 7% and a runaway lead for the incumbent mayor. Jay was looking around the room at some new people who’d walked in.

“I think I went too big too soon,” he said to us. “Maybe it should’ve been Mile End splitting from Montreal, from Quebec, and Canada. You gotta start small and go up in increments.”

“Waverly Street would hold a referendum in no time if that happened,” I said.

“*Eastside Waverly!*” Wa shouted now across the aisle.

“Eastside Waverly north of Fairmount,” Isabel said.

“My apartment. Sara’s room.”

“That’s the dream,” Jay said. “No nation bigger than your wingspan. Border control every time you take a step.”

“The dream,” Wa repeated walking back.

“Every man, woman, and child its own island,” I said.

Later, noticing everyone else in there was just talking amongst themselves, Jay stood up with a pint glass in his hand and leaned over the bar for the remote and switched the television to the hockey game. The Habs were down 2-0 to New Jersey in the second.

“Let’s go back to having the Habs disappoint us now instead,” he said, addressing the whole bar. “I’ve been hogging the spotlight all night.”

“The cup’s ours this year, man,” someone yelled out over the cackle. “I can fuckin’ feel it!”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that, buddy.” Turning to the waitress behind the bar, “Four more of the same,” Jay said. “With four chasers of Jameson. I mean... whatever the opposite of chaser is...”

He then downed his shot of whiskey and, turning to Wa, said, “Man, how about you and I hit this new bar on the Main I keep hearing about after this?”

“Can’t, man,” Wa said. “I’m working early tomorrow. Got a session at 9.”

“Who the fuck makes music at nine in the morning?” he said. Turning to Isabel and me, “How about you two? If he’s got a session at nine, it means you do not.”

“I would love to,” I said, “but Sara is with a sitter up the street and we said we’d be there by ten at the latest.”

Jay looked at his watch. “Yeah, well that’s no good.”

Wa left not long after that. Isabel and I stayed with Jay for another drink and then told him we, too, had to split.

“You sure you’re going to be OK?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll stay here and have another couple of drinks. I’ve got some dreaming to do.”

“You sure?” Isabel asked.

“Positive,” he said with a wink.

It was still raining as we walked up to Bernard Street to pick up Sara, albeit not as hard as earlier that day. As we passed Fairmount, a trimetrical chant erupted into a roar somewhere down the street, as Isabel pointed out how she’d never noticed that, if you looked closely enough, you could see the word *nest* faded on the Fairmount street sign. Someone was standing in front of a bar belting out the theme from *Notre-Dame de Paris* for his friends, who were huddled around him having a smoke and joining in on the words they knew. Someone was on the phone swearing using three languages in the same sentence. Someone had spray painted *Fuck the Yids* on the wall of the Hassidic school and someone had crossed it out in blue paint with a single strikethrough, adding, *Fuck toi*, beside it; someone had amended the original in a lurid green to make it say *Fuck the Yoda*. Someone

had left out a box full of things like rotary telephones and purple plastic toy propellers to sit there on a front lawn in the rain under a sign that said to please take. Someone's cat was howling at the moon like a dog. Some hapless old sot walked through an alleyway holding a newspaper over his head and a king can in his other hand, muttering something about the implacable encroachment of kismet on our wayward ways. Someone was looking at the stars out a dormer window, inconspicuously billowing wisps of marijuana smoke every now and then. Down the street someone was practicing a 6/8 time signature on the drums and hitting the snare on every-damn-beat of every-damn-bar. Someone had chained their bike to an aluminium fence with a lock worth more than the bike and fence put together, in front of a house where someone had attempted to remove the patina off a copper beam cap before abandoning it midway. Someone had been removing the posters bands had plastered on telephone poles, but the bands had kept putting them back up again.

The sitter's living room was aglow with the bright flickering of violet and amber TV lights, and her garden was promising an abundance of yellow for the summer. We rang the doorbell and waited on the porch a moment. Then the sitter opened the door, and Sara appeared, in her matching oversized top and bottom navy sweats, yawning into her open hand, eyes upturned as if to let us know it was about time we showed up.

five.

*

The streetlamps outside the bedroom window of my new place were switched on despite the half-light still lingering in the backdrop, the wind blowing debris on the ground east to west as the sky over Manhattan cracked open silver and gold lashes. After stepping out the front door I almost turned right back, but since I'd seen so little of the neighbourhood in the few weeks I'd been living there, I threw on my raincoat and took my chances.

At one point I turned onto Hooper Street, following it to Union Avenue. The Williamsburg streets looked quiet, I thought, especially for a Friday night. Maybe because it was still early, maybe on account of a storm coming. But I kept going. When I got to Union and Grand I spotted a bar just off the corner, called *Neptune Alley*, with a sign in front advertising drink specials and live music on that night. I paid the fifteen bucks to get in and walked up to the second floor, where I sat down at the bar, ordering a beer off a waiter with a horseshoe moustache. A beat-up Gretsch drum kit with a sunburst finish stood on stage, the room sparsely filled as I overheard the guy next to me explain to his friend about this being an industry showcase event, which meant that the bands had twenty-minute-five sets at the top of each hour. In his words, it also meant a lot of drinking time between bands.

By the time I'd finished my beer there was still quite a while to go before the next act. I asked the bartender for another one and in the meantime went down to have a smoke in front. Outside it was dark and starting to drizzle and a kid in skinny jeans and the Stone Roses t-shirt where Ian's wearing a crown of thorns was standing on the curb smoking a cigarette, holding his cell phone to his ear with his shoulder. After every drag he'd expedite the cigarette out of his mouth like he was shooting darts. He was explaining to the person on the other end how the venue sound guy had been knocking back tequila shots all evening, to a point where he didn't know what the hell he

was doing anymore. Apparently the last band up there sounded like shit because of him. They *needed* to sound good, he said—some guy from some label was there to see them play.

From what I could understand, the guy on the other end was meant to know his way around a sound board, but he was stuck in Greenpoint at the time; the kid in skinny jeans was trying to persuade him to jump into a taxi and come down to the gig, offering him cab fare and an extra fifty bucks for his troubles. At the moment the kid hung up the phone, it was still unclear whether the guy on the line had agreed to come down or not.

It started to rain hard all of a sudden. One of the guy's bandmates came out at that point. "Jake, man," he said. "Come on—it's ten to. We really gotta finish setting up."

Part of me was stunned by the fact I'd been standing there the whole time and neither of them had recognized me—or even just noticed me. It was only a few months earlier that I'd told the whole world to fuck off on live TV. Maybe I really was a ghost. Or maybe the world just had that short an attention span. Not that it bothered me either way.

The two of them walked back upstairs and I finished my smoke and went up, too. As I sat down at the bar I saw that the A&R there to see them play was actually Bill Krantz—the bow-tied guy I had gotten into an argument with on that boat all those years ago. Poor kids, I thought. If they were any good, the best they could hope for out of this was Bill regretting not signing them twenty years down the line. Maybe he'd sign them on the spot if they sucked, though?

I sipped my beer watching the boys mill around and take a few levels themselves. Kick drum. Snare. Crash. Not that they really knew what they were doing. It appeared that the sound guy was now completely M.I.A.—and the guy from Greenpoint still a no-show with just a few minutes to go before the set.

A woman with a lanyard introduced them and they walked up on stage. The guitar player rang out an open chord, then went straight into these droning notes on the low strings he looped

through a pedal. Slow build-up. Too slow for Bill, who was already yawning into his fist at his table. These major label types can't understand a song that doesn't hit a chorus by the 59-second mark. It's still somehow an alien concept to them.

When the vocals kicked in and the guitar player moved up to the higher strings, and the drums went quiet, it became obvious the levels were way off. The EQ even more so. Some of the higher frequencies were making people in the audience stick their fingers into their ears and wince. That hi-hat especially.

While no one was looking my way, I took my beer over to the booth and got behind the console. I adjusted the levels, cut the highs off the cymbals and snare. With only a few minor tweaks you could really start to feel the bass pulsating on every kick. Their drummer could really hit that snare hard, but like a good drummer he knew when to back down, too. I remember thinking how if the audience had been made out of real people instead of suit-and-tie delegates I'd have been worried for the old and rickety hardwood beneath, but everyone in there was standing around with a pen and pad taking notes. Tough crowd to play for. The toughest, maybe. It takes your energy without giving any of it back to you.

I did my best to feed the band with the means I had. It was good to hear guitar music that made you want to dance. Songs that celebrated something. Music with a high. The band on stage could see me bopping and who knows if they recognized me or simply thought I was some mystery man stepping up to help them out, but they bopped along and gave that set their all. I looked over and noticed even Krantz was rocking his head to the beat.

It's not like I deserved any of the credit. No matter who you put behind the console at a live gig—whether you're doing sound for an unplugged gig at the café on the corner or you're doing Paul Simon in Central Park—the most you can hope for in each situation is to not fuck up what's

happening between the musicians on stage. To not make anyone's ears bleed. To be no worse than the room. That's the very best one can achieve.

As the last song went into the bridge, I looked at my watch and decided it was time for me to disappear. I got out of the booth and walked right past Krantz. His gaze was still fixed on the band on stage and he didn't notice me at all. It's not like he was going to sign them, though. That was the sad reality of the music business. They're always thinking, so a band can pack a room and play a great set—so what? So they have a handful of great songs, some that could even make good singles—so what? It's just never enough these days. Nobody gets signed—just not worth the risk. Not for a major label. The only time a major offers to step in is once a band proves it can do it all without them and no longer needs their help in the first place.

As I walked towards the exit I passed to the right of the stage and the bass player spotted me go by him and he turned and nodded at me, and I nodded back before heading down the flight of stairs and down the road.

The power was out for several blocks as I made my way home down Union Avenue. The pavement was wet and puddles overflowed from every pothole in the street. I remember walking and thinking about all this, about music, how it was always being used as a sort of marker for generations—with its *Never trust anyone over thirty* and its *I hope I die before I get old*—and how I was—were—from this last generation having grown up without the internet as a source of music. Maybe the ultimate generation gap when it came to music. Maybe the ultimate generation gap, period. I couldn't even imagine what future generation gaps would look like. What would Sara's children rebel against Sara's generation for?

On the way I walked into a bodega to buy cigarettes and a couple of cans of beer and then carried on my way again. I drank the beers on my front stoop when I got home that night. By then I wasn't thinking about music or about generation gaps anymore—I was just thinking about Sara. I'd

been in New York for a few weeks and was looking forward to seeing her that weekend. If the weather was nice maybe I'd even walk all the way to Prospect Park to pick her up. She'd turned nine a few weeks earlier. And somehow all these thoughts led me full circle. I was thinking how soon she'd probably be listening to bands I'd have a hard time understanding—or no sincere desire to understand. That was protocol. Or so I'd heard. But I promised myself I'd have to try—until I did. Because how can you even understand the kids if you don't understand the music they listen to, if you don't understand the medium? But also how can you understand the music if you don't understand the kids themselves? How can music capture a generation's worries and put it into melody? Somehow that's what it does. The two are quilted together, interwoven like they always were. Like they always will be, I thought. I gathered the couple of cans from the stoop, kicked the butts down to the curb, and went to bed.

I tried to sleep that night but couldn't. It was getting hot. The A.C. hadn't turned back on after the thunderstorm. I just sat in bed until outside the sun started to rise, over streetlamps dim but still burning, like a shift change, a *bi bye*, a *Mornin' Ralph Mornin' Sam*, showing off a sky that had been cleared by the previous day's downpour, at which point I had a shower and some coffee, before walking the three-or-so miles it took to get to Prospect Park.

*

It wasn't until I'd seen a banner up advertizing *fireworks sold here* in a Bedford Avenue storefront that I even realized it was 4th of July weekend. Not that that would change any plans Sara and I had. On our way back we'd just probably go out for lunch and then back to mine. Maybe play some songs on the record player. Or since it was nice out I thought maybe I'd see if she wanted to go up to the pool in McCarren Park for a swim.

Most of the city was still sleeping by the time I'd made it to Isabel's. I traipsed around the nearby streets trying to find a coffee shop that would let me kill an hour or two, but even the ones I found weren't even open yet. I ended up going to the park and sitting in view of her apartment window, picking blades off a dewy patch of grass, waiting for the curtains to be drawn. About an hour later I rang the doorbell and Isabel buzzed me in.

She appeared in the hallway in her bathrobe, arms folded and raising an eyebrow at me from her door as I walked out of the elevator. "You coming straight from a club or something?" she said.

I shook my head. "Just couldn't sleep."

I slipped off my shoes by the entrance and followed her into the kitchen.

"Is Sara up?" I asked.

She brought a finger to her lips while the other hand motioned up and down as if patting a dog on the head. She flicked the switch on the coffee machine.

"And I also hate to be the one to tell you this," she whispered. "But if you're here to pick her up, you're kind of early."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm gonna take a guess and say you're here 'cause you got the days wrong... Today's Friday."

“Shit.”

“You’re meant to pick her up tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Days are starting to all feel the same.”

That apartment had huge bay windows with a clear view of the park, and from where I stood I could see the sun hitting the grass under where I’d been sitting moments earlier, blades on a slant, my outline almost visible.

“It’s fine,” Isabel said. “To be honest, I wouldn’t even mind. I’d say go ahead and take her now, since you’re already here and all, but she and I are going to my mom’s for lunch.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s my mistake. I’ll just come back tomorrow.”

“Tell you what, though,” she said reaching for the pot of coffee and pouring it into two navy porcelain mugs with crests on them. “We won’t even be gone that long. Till maybe four— five at the very latest. Sara wanted to watch the fireworks up on the roof tonight. We’ve got a great three-sixty view of the whole thing. If you want, meet us back here later for dinner? We can grill some sausages or something...”

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds good.”

And so I ended up walking back to Williamsburg on my own that morning. It must’ve been at least thirty degrees already even though it wasn’t yet 10am. On the way I stopped in a few stores and bought some things for that evening. A twelve-pack of German beer, two bottles of Champagne, a half-dozen bratwurst sausages, three kinds of potato chips and a bottle of pop. And then I lugged it all home.

My place was sweltering when I got back. I tried to get the air conditioning going again but it wouldn’t give. I left the superintendent a message and then drank one of the beers and it managed to cool me down. At least it did for a bit. An hour later still no word from the super. I drank a second one and figured I would walk up to McCarren Park and go for a swim in the pool anyway.

The pool had not been open long when I got there, but around the centerpiece of arctic blue, bodies already lay there fallow in the sunlight. I laid my towel on the ground and walked over to the edge of the pool, sitting down, water up to the top of my shins, the sun against the back of my head quickly going from warm to unbearable. I stood up, counted to three and dove in. For a moment, that feeling underwater where the world outside is drowned out feels so peaceful—until of course you realize you're running out of air—so I came back up to the surface and front crawled the rest of the way to the other end. And after that lap I told myself I'd swim one more. And I kept going like that—one more every time. Till I had swum ten, then twenty—maybe fifty laps in total. I stopped counting somewhere along the way.

Sapped by the swim I held on to the edge of the pool, behind on my breath, and I pulled myself out of the water, floundering past the lifeguard, and she bent down over the arm of her chair, folding forearm over other forearm, telling me not to dive next time. I put my hand up and gave her a thumbs up, trundling over to my towel and falling onto my back, closing my eyes to let the rays of sun do their thing to the droplets of water left on me. I think I even fell asleep for a bit.

That evening I took a cab back down to Prospect Park. Isabel and Sara were the only ones there on the building's communal rooftop when I walked up that fire exit staircase from the top floor, arms weighed down by four plastic bags. It would stay just the three of us for the rest of the night.

Though now lower the sun was still out strong. Sounds of a live band playing echoed from the park at a distance where only high and low frequencies could be heard distinctly—everything else a jumble. Isabel said the fireworks would be coming from every direction, mentioning Roman candles and Catherine wheels, and though Sara didn't know what these were, she seemed excited by the sounds of the words themselves.

It was still light out when I popped the cork off a first bottle of champagne. In her lavender dress with the flower patch on the left shoulder strap, Sara looked at me and put her finger in her mouth before replicating the sound of the cork's pop. Cookouts from roofs of nearby buildings then started to waft past; Sara sat in my lap and played a tic-tac-toe game on her tablet while Isabel got the gas barbecue going. Sara had the Xs and I had the Os. Sausages were frizzling over the flame, twilight just about yielding to the night.

And as the first fireworks were projected into the gunmetal night, Sara jumped up, discarding her plateful of crumbs in my lap, running over to the railing to get a glimpse from as close as she could. I could only see the back of her head, but the angle at which it was tilted seemed to suggest awe.

“I think that’s Queens,” Isabel said walking over towards me. “Just by parents’ old place. We used to be able to see the fireworks from up real close when we lived there... Back when I was a kid.”

She reached down in the cooler and handed me a beer before sitting down in the chair next to me. More fireworks were popping now, over Manhattan this time. Sara didn’t know where to look. And at one point she stopped looking at them altogether. She pulled a one-eighty and walked over to her mother’s chair and then jumped into her lap.

“Easy there,” Isabel said. “You’re not as little as you think anymore.”

Sara giggled.

Isabel handed her a chocolate drumstick she’d reached out of the cooler. Sara gave it right back to her, asking her to open it. The chocolate part around the rim had already started to melt by the time it was back in her hand.

The sky was quiet for almost an hour. In the distance, above Manhattan, I watched the halo hang, reflecting about how I'd gone from growing up on an island, living on one my entire life, to moving somewhere I could sit on the banks and watch another one as it went to sleep.

"Weird we haven't seen any fireworks from Coney Island yet," Isabel said looking southwards. Sara was still sitting in her lap, at this point fighting the sleep in her eyes with the palm of her hand.

"Coney Island has fireworks?" Sara said mid-yawn.

"You bet Coney Island has fireworks," Isabel said to her. "You've even been down there to see them. Don't you remember when we used to go to Coney Island?"

Sara shook her head.

"We went there a lot when you were little," I said. "Pretty much every time we were here in New York."

"We have pictures of it," Isabel confirmed. "Remember that one of you with cotton candy all over your face? Well, that's where that was."

All three of us were staring into that dark and open space, and just as Sara looked away, that space was filled with marigold sparklers.

"Speak of the devil," Isabel said. "As if on cue."

I thought about the three of us walking down that boardwalk in Coney Island—Sara couldn't have been more than three. And as we tottered our way hand in hand in hand down the stony ground by the arcades, a game someone was playing was radiating all kinds of light. Sara clutched onto my leg, and we stopped to watch. It was a fortune-telling machine where you'd put a quarter in and the gypsy figure inside would tell you what your future had in store for you. Or something like that. But it had these eyes that would turn bright red, and when Sara saw that she started bawling her eyes out. But then, not even an hour after that she asked to go back and see it again. At first we said

no, but she insisted so much that in the end we gave in. And when we walked past it she started crying again, even harder than the first time.

“What was that machine’s name?” I said.

“Which machine?”

“The arcade game Sara was terrified of,” I said. At the sound of her name, or maybe the mention of her terror, Sara seemed to wake from her half-slumber. “You know... That fortune teller thing.”

“Oh,” Isabel laughed. “I remember the game. I can’t remember what it was called, though. It’s a famous one.”

“What game?” Sara said tugging on her mother’s sleeve.

“Not surprising you don’t remember,” I said. “You were tiny... There was this arcade game that told fortunes—told the future. You took one look at it and started crying. He had these eyes that turned really, really red—it was kind of scary.” Even in the dullness of the light I could see Sara’s smile limn her cheeks with colour before she buried her face in her mother’s armpit.

“But you kept wanting to go back,” Isabel added. “That’s the interesting part.”

“It sounds very scary,” Sara said, now revealing her face.

Leaning back in my chair, I gave Sara a nod. Turning to Isabel, “That thing still around, you think?”

“Beats me,” she shrugged. “It looked old as hell even then.”

The fireworks were still going. At one point I closed my eyes and focused instead on the sounds they made. The whistles and crashes, the bangs and hisses. I listened to the sequences in which they came. Noticing patterns. I realized I’d never paid much attention to the sound fireworks made before. I guess it’s just not something people do.

“You could take Sara to Coney Island tomorrow,” Isabel said. “If you’ve got nothing else planned, that is.”

“Maybe I’ll do that,” I said opening my eyes.

“I’d even come with you guys,” she said. “I’ve been craving a Coney Island dog for the longest time... But I promised my mom I’d go back to her place in the morning to help her move some boxes.”

“Thought you said Coney Island dogs were disgusting.”

“They are, but that doesn’t mean I don’t crave them once in a while.”

“Maybe Sara and I’ll head down there first thing in the morning, then,” I said. “You could meet us after?”

I looked over at Sara for a sign of approval but she’d fallen asleep.

“Maybe,” Isabel said

After we put Sara to bed on the floor below, she and I went back upstairs and sat up there some more. The skies were no longer being lit up but music was still resonating off crowns of the park’s tallest trees. We uncorked another bottle of champagne we then passed around, drinking this one straight out of the bottle.

“So what’ve you been doing since you got here?” Isabel asked.

“Fuck all,” I shrugged. “I unpacked a few boxes. Ordered chicken wings from the place on the corner more times than I’d like to admit. But for the most part I don’t really know what to do with myself yet.”

“Now you know how it feels,” she gave a laugh. “Well, let me give you one piece of wisdom passed down by the Ancient Romans.” She raised the bottle of champagne above her head. “They say, *In vino tedium moriatur.*”

“Is this another one of your art things? What’s it mean?”

“Another one of your art things,” she laughed giving me a shove on the shoulder. “Asshole... It means ‘In wine, boredom croaks,’ basically.”

“That’s terrible advice.”

“I saw it on a subway ad,” she shrugged... So no plans to start working, then, huh?”

“No hurry to, either.”

I told her about the gig I’d been to the night before and the shit-faced sound guy going M.I.A.. I told her about Krantz being there in the crowd.

“Yeah, I think I remember him,” she said. “The guy in the bow-tie desperately trying to impress Clay. And then you came ripping into him like no tomorrow. Did he even really deserve it? I can’t remember how it started.”

I shrugged.

“He was a bit of a dufus, though. No doubt about that.” She put her feet up on the chair and wrapped her arms around her shins. “But still,” she continued. “Noble of you to have helped those kids out, without wanting the recognition or anything. That has to mean good karma for you somewhere.”

“To tell you the truth,” I said. “It wasn’t entirely selfless. I just didn’t think I could have handled another late-night barroom conversation about music. Not with Krantz. Not with those kids. That’s why I got the fuck out of there.”

“Whatever,” she said reaching over and into my pocket for my pack of smokes. “What you do matters more than the reasoning behind it.”

“Maybe.” I offered her a light. “Thought you said you’d quit?”

She blew out the flame and seized the lighter out of my hand. “I’m full of shit,” she said. “I had one this morning. I have a pack of Camels in my drawer. Still so good with a drink. Never in front of Sara, though.”

I took one out of the pack and she lit it for me, and as we sat out there she rested her head on my shoulder and we talked about all sorts of trivialities. How everywhere you went, yoga pants seemed to stay the same. The underarm-yoga-mat walk, even more so. How the rats in Brooklyn seemed even bigger and more fearless than the ones in Manhattan sometimes. That sort of thing. Sometimes the unimportant things feel the most important, precisely because of how unimportant they are.

I reached over and grabbed a beer from the cooler and offered it to her. She shook her head.

“I’m alright,” she said. “Probably about time I turn in.”

I cracked it open and stared up at the sky directly above looking for stars but there were so few to be seen. I counted maybe three and they were all way out. I took a swig and felt like I didn’t want the sun to rise.

“One more,” I insisted. “I have to tell you the latest Drumz story.”

“Fine,” she said. “One more.”

I cracked one open for her with my lighter and passed it to her.

“So you know how he went to jail, right?” She nodded. “Well, he came out the other end thinking he was done with drugs, done with rapping. He wanted a clean break. Even decided to change his name.”

“His artist name?”

“His legal name.”

“What is his real name, anyway?”

“Alan. Alan Shefford. But he decides to go all-out French Canadian because one of his grandmothers was from the Beauce region, and she’d died not long ago, and I guess he wanted to pay tribute to that part of his heritage, so he decides to legally change his name to Alain Chevrier.”

“That’s fair,” Isabel said. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“But Chevrier is not even his grandmother’s name,” I said. “Not even close, for that matter. He just picked it ’cause it sounded a bit like Shefford... But on his way to the courthouse to make the change he bumps into Skinny Zonk, who just happens to be there roaming the streets for some reason. And Zonk convinces him to at least send Alan Shefford out on a high note and invites Drumz to smoke one last spliff as his former identity. ‘What the hell,’ Drumz says, and they go toke up in an alleyway in Old Montreal. While they’re smoking, Zonk is telling Drumz how, ‘Hey, you know what would be really cool? If you put in a triple letter in your name. Like you know how Bill has two Ls at the end, or Aaron starts with two As, I’ve never seen a name,’ Zonk tells him, ‘where the same letter comes up three times in a row.’”

“Please tell me he didn’t.”

“A-a-aron Chevrier. Three straight As to start the name. Now also known as Triple-A Chevrier.”

Isabel spat out her drink, folding forward chest over thighs, her hand over her eyes. “I’m dying,” she said trying to catch her breath. “I’m actually dying... Why A-a-aron, though? I thought the point was to change it to Alain because it was a francophone name?”

“It was,” I said. “But I guess because Zonk put Aaron in his head, he somehow ended up writing that down instead.”

“Incredible,” she said. “Absolutely incredible.”

We sat out there till the cooler had no more beers left in it and then we stayed some more, till light started appearing, somewhere over Long Island.

“Now it’s really time I turned in,” Isabel said. “Do you want to come down?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I said.

“O.K.,” she said, and after a long pause with her eyes downturned she looked up, “You know—” she said. “Maybe we’ve both been stupid... You more than me, obviously.” Looking over her shoulder she paused as if contemplating a frozen afterimage of the fireworks down south. “But maybe you should—we should—I don’t know—say fuck it and you just come live here.”

She gave me two taps on the thigh and said *think about it*, and stood up and gathered the remaining bottles and cans off the table; with one free arm she opened the door and paused at the jamb and turned around.

“It’s not like you’ve got anything better to do,” she added, laughing to herself as she disappeared from the doorway.

*

As I take a sip from my last glass a snowball hits the window right by where I'm sitting, producing a thud and leaving astral imprints, with bits of snow and ice crystals detaching from the centre to slide down the surface of the pane. My eyes focus out past the fogged-up glass and I see Jay in the street, standing by the driver-side door of a white Econoline van he'd kept running, as he gestures for me to come. Throwing on my coat, I glance around for the waitress, but seeing that she is nowhere near, I do the math in my head, adding the tip and rounding it up, and leave the money on the table before running out.

"What the fuck was that about?" I belt out at him once I make it onto the front steps. "Can't you just come in and say hello and have a drink like a normal person?"

"No time," he says pointing to a non-existent watch. "Not right now at least. Maybe later. Sorry I'm late—it's been a real shitshow. What with the snow and all."

"Late, you say? I almost had time to finish an entire bottle of wine by myself. Come to think of it you could've at least come in and given me the time to down the last glass."

"Sorry bud," he shrugs. "That's what an angel's share is for, ain't it?"

"What did you say?"

"An angel's share," he repeats. "Hop in, will ya? I'll explain everything on the way."

Reluctant, even giving an audible sigh, I make my way down the steps and go around to the passenger side. Not only do I want to avoid being dragged out to a string of endless bars and warehouse parties while back in Montreal—conceding on that would be bad enough—but getting in a car with Jay at the helm is something else altogether. It's something I'd done only once in my life and it was so terrifying an experience I'd sworn I'd never do it again.

“Listen,” I say as he kicks the van into gear. “If you’re just dragging me to another bar to go drinking with Zonk or Triple A or whoever the fuck else, I don’t want to fuckin’ go. I gotta go back to New York tonight.”

“Don’t worry,” he says. “We’re not going to another bar, man. Besides, haven’t you heard? Triple A is back in the joint. I’ll tell you more about that, but it’ll have to wait till later.”

Sitting between my feet is a twelve pack of PBR cans. Jay runs right through a stop sign to make his way west on a street just below Sherbrooke.

“So where is it we’re going?” I ask.

“Up to the belvedere,” he says, left hand a twelve at the wheel, the other up in the air gesturing.

“Westmount Belvedere?” I ask.

“No—the one on Mount-Royal,” he says. “By the cross.”

“You just suddenly dying to see the view? Is this why this is so urgent?”

“Not just for the view,” he says. “I’ve been shooting a film. Didn’t I mention this last time I saw you?”

“Yeah, what about it? I thought you’d have been done shooting this a long time ago.”

“Well, sort of. It got delayed again. Several times. Some complications just had to rise out of the woodwork.”

“Jeez, what now, Jay?”

“The studio didn’t want to fork over all the dough,” he explains. “There was one scene in particular they had a problem with. For starters, in the budget, that scene cost more than the rest of the film combined. That alone was enough to raise a few serious eyebrows. But more than anything, it involved some sketchy dealings to get it done the way I wanted it.”

“Sketchy dealings?” I say. “Sketchy how?”

“Some grey area moral ground the studio just wasn’t ready to sanction. So their proposed solution was to just cut it entirely.”

“So, let me guess—you walked out?”

“Not at all,” he says raising both hands off the wheel. “You kidding me? No way would I have walked out on my first chance at a feature. Instead, I solved the problem the way any respectable millennial would have done.”

“You’re not a millennial, Jay.”

“I’m at the cusp,” he says, almost proud. Turning to me, “You are, too.”

“Eyes on the road, please,” I say. “And two hands on the wheel. So—fine, you’re a millennial, I’m a millennial—what is it that you did?”

“I decided,” he turns to me while speeding up Park Avenue, “that I’d fund it myself. Or, you know, more or less myself.”

“I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“It means I crowdfunded the scene.”

I let out a snort. “Crowdfunded? You?”

“You bet.”

“Well, that’s kind of a shock,” I say. “So how much did you raise?”

“Just shy of half a mil.”

“Bucks!?” I say. “Half a fuckin’ million!? Just by crowdfunding? How on fuckin’ earth?”

“Because of that whole mayoral race thing,” he explains. “It left me with a whole lot of traction. Even with a few favours I could call in. I got these huge donations from places like Qatar and Belarus. For what reason—well, at the end of the day who the hell knows and who the hell cares, right?”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“No need to say anything,” he scoffs. “You’ll see it all for yourself in a sec.”

He’s now gunning it up Park Avenue, then he cuts across the mountain on Camilien-Houde, and then past the cavalry and driving right up pedestrian paths.

“So let me guess—you’re shooting this scene tonight?” I say.

“I can’t get anything past you,” he says. “But the thing is—I only have a thirty second window to do it. Between 2100 hours and 2101 hours. The first half of that. I’m just lucky the snow stopped. For a moment it was looking like I’d have had to postpone it, and that would’ve meant another month at least. But turns out we’re back on.”

“I’m so lost, man.”

“It’ll all make sense very soon,” he says. “God willing.”

Arriving at the belvedere he parks the van on a diagonal across three spots, rutting the tires in uncleared snow and leaving the keys in the ignition, motor still running and pumping fumes out the exhaust.

“Do me a favour,” he says opening his door. “Grab that case of PBR and stash it in a snowbank somewhere. Go ahead and crack a couple open while you’re at it.”

As I take the case with me and step outside, I see we are the only ones there and that the belvedere has been cordoned off with yellow police tape that says *danger*.

“I’m really confused,” I say putting the case down on the railing. “You’re shooting a scene costing you half a million bucks, aren’t you? Where the hell is your, you know, crew?”

Jay is rummaging in the bushes trying to pull something out, cursing when a branch snaps back to hit him across the side of his head. “I don’t need a crew for this,” he belts out. “They’re kind of everywhere. Everything else has been in place for ages now. I was even going to do this part on my own. But since you were in town... I figured, hey... The more, the merrier.”

Laughing to myself, I crack open a first can and leave one lodged in the snow for Jay, and then I take a sip of it while he rummages some more, till out of the bush he pulls out a quadcopter drone he then puts down on the snowy ground in front of me.

“Couldn’t you have left that in the van?” I ask looking at it, perplexed, then back up at him, “Why’d you have to hide it in the bushes?”

“It’s kind of complicated,” he says rubbing his hands together for warmth. “Damn, I should’ve brought gloves. But, yeah, I didn’t know I was going to use the van to pick you up. What time is it, anyway?”

“8.51,” I say after looking at my phone.

“Great,” he says. “Plenty of time. I don’t need more than four minutes to get the altitude I want. Five at most. Pass me that can, will you?”

“Jay—what the fuck is going on?” I say handing it to him.

“Just chill, will you?” he says opening the can and having a sip from it. “I don’t want to spoil it for you. Find a spot on the railing and just watch.”

I walk over to the railing and dust the snow off a piece of it before jumping up. “Fine,” I say. “Where am I even looking?”

Mid another sip he points south. “Anywhere, really.”

He pulls out an i-Pad from the van and sets it up on a stand, and after a few taps the screen is showing what the drone is seeing, which at the moment is just a patch of white below it. He takes out a remote control and gets the drone off the ground.

“Gentlemen,” he says in a nasal NASA voice. “We have lift off.”

As the drone starts gaining altitude, an aerial shot of the snow-tipped roofs of the hills first comes into view on the tablet screen, and then as it gets higher, snow-capped trees appear, and eventually city lights.

“You’re looking the wrong way, dude,” Jay yells out.

“Alright, alright. Settle down there, Eurydice.” I turn to face the other way.

It’s a view of the city I’d seen countless times—one I’d shown Sara countless times, both in the daylight and illuminated at nighttime, in almost every season. I’d pointed to all the bridges, all the downtown buildings, the casino, and the Far ne F ve Ros s building which now read Fa ine Five R ses.

“Time?” Jay yells out.

“8:57.”

“Good, just about in place. A little to the left and... yep... there we go. That’s perfect.” His hands interlaced, looking above, he says, “God, if you’re up there, somewhere, I’d really owe you one if you can somehow make this work. Amen.”

After uttering that prayer he makes the sign of the cross and jumps up onto the railing, with two hands and propelling his legs forward, the way one would mount a pommel horse or jack a fence if in pursuit, and sits down next to me. I watch the southern half of the island, and the thought that crosses my mind is how this could’ve possibly cost as much as Jay said it had. One man and a drone. And maybe a tank of gas, a rental van—and case of PBR if you really wanted to push it.

“Mekka-lekka-hi Mekka-fuckin-hiney-ho,” he lets out, staring ahead as I take out a cigarette from my pocket, while he rubs his hands together as if in some incantation.

And just as I’m about to light the cigarette I feel this dull black void swooping from the corner of my eyelid, over from the west side, in three rapid and staggered flicks extinguishing everything there, from west to east, everything from the West Island, then Downtown, then the East End. Other than a few specks, like the General Hospital and a few buildings here and there, the entire island is now without light. My jaw relaxed and my mouth agape, the cigarette falls into the thickets below the railing.

I sit there silent for a moment. “What the fuck just happened?” I eventually say.

Jay gives a chuckle. “Watch!” He points in the direction of the Victoria Bridge.

Still, nothing is happening.

“Anytime now,” he adds.

Lights here and there start shimmering from the southern tip, in no real order, as if at random, and then the same is happening on all sides, a staggered cascade, like watching a wall of paparazzis snapping shots of you as you make your way down a red carpet.

It goes on for about a minute, and by then the whole city is lit up again.

For a moment I sit there staring ahead not saying a word, and I think my silence makes Jay very content. He’s smiling to himself, once in a while erupting into a laugh, watching me stare at the afterimage of what we’ve just seen. I finally reach into my pocket and pull out a cigarette and light it, still silently digesting what has happened. The hard part isn’t believing what I’ve just seen—it’s believing that Jay had somehow orchestrated this.

And the first words my lips can finally utter are, “I just don’t get it.”

“What is it you don’t get?” Jay says.

“How?” I say. “How in fuck was that even possible?”

Jay reaches over. “Give me one of those darts,” he laughs. I hand him a cigarette. “If there’s one thing I learned campaigning,” he says pausing to light it, “it’s that you can get anything done in this city as long as you grease the right people.”

“You mean to tell me you greased Hydro Quebec?” I say. “You bought yourself a fuckin city-wide power failure?”

“Close enough,” he laughs.

Leaping off the railing with the cigarette in his mouth, he goes to get the tablet, as I pop open two more cans. He plays me the video of the aerial shot. Impressive, without a doubt, even on a small screen, but in no way can it match what I've just seen happen live.

"I don't want to insult you or anything," I say. "But couldn't you have saved a shit-ton of cash by using CGI and a green screen or something?"

"C'mon, man," he lets out a muffled sound through his cigarette, his arms aloft. "Sometimes you need a little spontaneous beauty. Even the contrived kind. Sometimes that's all this world craves. All it needs. And you're not gonna get that from CGI."

I nod. "You're probably right."

"All that's missing now is the right music," he says still focusing on the footage. "The shot is worth nothing without the right music."

"I don't know about that. It looks pretty great even on its own, Jay."

He raises his can of beer with one arm way up and the other folded against him, the same way he'd done it on the steps of our high school on our last day there, years ago, and I raise mine to his.

We sit there talking and drinking for a little while.

"So," I say at one point. "Tell me, now—why's Triple A back in the joint?"

"It was the darndest thing," Jay says shaking his head. "Some of us took him out on the night of his birthday. Wa, Zonk, me, the Bourque brothers, and a few other guys I didn't know so well. And Triple A kept insisting we go to one of the strip clubs—insisting it be the one all the way down on St. Jacques. So we took him. And at one point Wa and I are at the bar getting a round and we come back and Triple A is sitting front row corner and two girls are dancing in front of him on stage. One of them is bent over and communicating to the other girl via the mirror—this even we

only realized later on—to slap her on the ass. But Triple A is sitting there with his dumb smile thinking she’s talking to him.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I say bringing down my forehead to my palm. “Please tell me he didn’t.”

“And I swear to God—Me and Wa are walking back into the room, each holding about six drinks each, and we see Triple A get up off his chair, wind up, and smack that girl’s ass with all he’s got.”

“Dear lord.”

“I know, right? You should’ve seen Wa’s face, man. That freeze-frame will be imprinted in my temporal lobe till the day I kick it. But the bouncers they see that from way over and they come running, and you know Wa—he’s as peacemaker as they come. He puts down the drinks on a speaker and starts dashing towards the scene to throw his body in the way—for Triple A’s sake. But it was too late. Triple A saw the bouncer charging him and his street instinct just kicked in, I guess. He grabbed an empty Heineken bottle and smacked the bouncer in the head with it, but not in like a bonk on top of the head Warner Brothers cartoon kind of way, but straight across the face, hard enough for the glass to shatter and a shard to lodge itself right into that poor bastard’s jowls. Horrific scene, truly. Pissin’ blood everywhere. And just a terrible misunderstanding, too, at the end of the day. The judge didn’t see it that way, though. Repeat offender and all. He’s now back at Bordeaux doing three to five. Pending appeal.”

“That’s all so insane,” I say. “But somehow nothing surprises me anymore when it comes to Triple A.”

“Yeah, that poor fuck is like the hero in his very own Greek tragedy.”

“How’s Wa doing, anyway?” I ask. “It’s been ages since I’ve seen him.”

“Tired, man,” Jay says. “Always fuckin’ milling around sleep deprived. But that’s kind of normal when you’ve got four kids.”

“Four kids? The fuck you talking about? I saw him last year and he didn’t have any?”

“Well, you know he had those cousins who died in the Haiti earthquake? It took years and years but he was finally able to get legal custody of their kids and bring them to Montreal. Though half of them are teens by now.”

“I had no idea.”

“I don’t know how he does it, man. He works about ninety hours per week.”

“Wa’s a beaut, man.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Wa is a beaut. That’s for damn fuckin’ sure.”

And for a moment we sit there silent. I’m watching all the lights from the houses and apartment buildings wondering what had gone through the heads of the people living there when the power had been cut. Not that this was that unusual. Your run of the mill power failure, that is. That’s probably why Jay’d been able to pull it off. No one would even know it had hit the whole city at once. Or returned in that sequence. Those folks were probably just relieved to see it come back so soon. It made me think of the ice storm in the winter of ’98, when some places went without electricity for two, even three, weeks. No heating or nothing. The US army was even there in the streets to help clear ice-laden branches and even entire trees that had collapsed to block off major streets and boulevards. Everything in the city was shut. Everything except maybe hotels and a few bars that had their own generators for some reason. Jay and me bumped into a group of soldiers one night and brought them to one of these bars. We ordered rounds and rounds of drinks and sat there till closing time, and the soldiers were so grateful to have found a watering hole given the circumstances that they insisted they pick up the whole tab, but Jay told them to shut the fuck up, that they weren’t gonna pay for shit, and after a few words into the owner’s ear, the tab had somehow been settled.

“Come on,” Jay says at one point, slapping my knee three times. “I’m getting cold. I’ll pack this stuff up and take you back to the hotel.”

“You know what?” I say. “You go ahead. I kind of feel like walking.”

“Walking!? In this cold? Down through the woods. What are you talking about?”

“It’s OK, Jay,” I say. “I can handle the cold.”

“If you say so,” he says.

“Proud of you making your film, man. I still have no idea how that scene fits into the whole thing, but I’m sure it’ll be great. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Still so much left to do.”

“You’ll get there.”

“I know I will,” he says. “Maybe once the cut is right I can come visit and we can score it somewhere down in New York.”

“You bet.”

“Alright—it’s a deal, then.”

And as I turn my body towards him and extend my hand, his eyes remain fixed on the fingers of my other hand.

“What’s with the ring?” he asks, one eyelid frowning. “You get hitched or something?”

I nod. “It was a visa thing mostly.”

“Right,” he says. “Visa thing.”

“When there’s a real ceremony, you’ll be there of course.”

“Of course,” he says. “I’ll be there for the real ceremony.”

And so I say goodbye to Jay, with him saying *see you when I see you* as he walks away, and I’m staring at the revolving light on top of Place Ville-Marie as I hear the Econoline’s engine fade off, back to where we’d come from. And I stare at this picture for a while, till I, too, start feeling cold,

and then get up, rounding the serpentine roads among the tall evergreens moon-kissed and snow-capped, and make my way down to Sherbrooke Street.

There's no way I'm be going all the way back to the same hotel—it's just too far. And in any case, I have everything I brought here on me. It's too late to go back to New York, though, so I decide I'll find any hotel. And so I keep walking.

I walk inside the first hotel I see and get a key, and after getting a nightcap at the bar—a double Scotch on ice—I go upstairs to my room, using the staircase instead of the elevator, for all seven flights up, winded by the time I reach my floor. And I walk down the hall, weary from the night, though my mind still clear. First thing I do when I get into my room, before even switching on a light, is walk to the window, which has on the wall beside it a sign saying *Interdiction de fumer: Amende 1000\$*. I say those French words aloud as I pull out a cigarette and light it. There isn't much of a view. Just the next building's brick wall and the smoke billowing out of its chimney. And feet and feet of snow down below in the recess. Metres of it. Cold seizing the room through the open window. My breath between puffs just as thick as the puffs themselves, windswept and rising like helium balloons. Music is playing from another room. A string quartet. Prominent minor thirds. The occasional dissonance more noticeable with a wall between. And that faded brick, faded by the years, not the faded kind they stack together nowadays for cushy downtown condos to make you feel like you're bohemians for three or four grand a month. A copper roof turned green from a hundred Montreal winters. And my guitar-playing calluses now so yellow at the fingertips that I see golden irises every time I blink.

The cigarette still in my mouth I take off my coat and toss it on the carpeted floor. As I stand at the window I think about Jay blowing the whole city's power for a shot and it makes me laugh. I laugh loud enough for anyone in the hallway to hear. I'm almost envious of him in some way. I think about Isabel and the way she'd pause after every stroke of her brush, as if

contemplating, though not according to her, and then resume in such organic fashion, like the pause was akin to the break between inhale and exhale, in slightly elongated form, and I'm envious of that, too. I also think about Jenn. And as I toss my cigarette down on the thick cushion of snow in the recess, seeing it extinguish in a dull whoot sound that maybe I only imagine, I think about Sara. About her understanding of assonance and dissonance and her disputing music's duty to gratify. How that gives me hope. How that gives all of us hope. How I need nothing else. And about the way she'd run circles as a child like a puppy let off a leash while blowing soap bubbles rings and skipping over imaginary hurdles and then sprinting to imaginary finish lines, arms aloft in a victorious perfect V, in races you'd never had a sporting chance, races you'd never wanted a sporting chance, and how that was alright. About the way she'd risen, and how there I'd risen, too, despite it all—and about fathers and daughters, and about all the sacred bonds, and forgiving myself for any other betrayals that occurred as result, which was treason to some, and in all fairness was treason in my book, too, but, you know, hey, sometimes shit happens.

I kick off my boots and on my back inch my way up to the top of the headrest. I pull a few Ambiens from the bottle in my coat and swallow them without water. With the light coming in through the window, the ceiling scaly and almost reptilian, and a dull midnight blue from the outdoor light between shadows of things like bedside lamps and my stretched-out body splay-limbed and cruciform, with its digits edging past the bed. As I stare at the ceiling, still in the day's clothes, waiting for the Ambien to kick in, the thought that hits me is that if you're somehow just willing to accept things as they came, then surely, in one way or another, the things would have to at least come. And in the weariness of that moment, that feels good enough for me.

*

And my thoughts drift to how I was the first to wake up the morning after the fireworks. And after walking over to the kitchen I brewed a pot of coffee and then took a cup upstairs to the rooftop. From up there the morning looked a perfect still frame, and other than the twitter of birds, and maybe the odd car passing by, you couldn't really hear a thing.

I'd received an email from Jay. He was saying how he'd got an indie film studio in Los Angeles interested in an idea of his for a feature. Nothing had been signed yet, he wrote, but it looked promising. He was flying down there the following week, in his email asking if he could crash at mine should he arrange a stopover in New York on the way back.

I was thrilled for him, of course, but as I put away my phone, sipping my coffee in the tranquillity of the morning, I just couldn't help but wonder, even then, how much of this new opportunity had to do with the publicity he'd received from the mayoral campaign—a story that had, after all, piqued interest internationally—and to what extent this had been some sort of masterplan on Jay's part all along. Knowing him, there was little doubt there'd been a plan. But it's not like it would've been just a simple publicity stunt. It wouldn't be Jay's type to con for his own benefit. If he was going to do something like that, he had to at least convince himself there was some grander meaning to it, some value to the greater good of all. I loved that about Jay. There was often more heart in his bullshit than in others' most sincere moments—more than in his own most sincere moments, even—if we're being honest. When something mattered to Jay, he'd turn himself into a photo negative. And though he didn't say anything in detail about the feature idea, I knew even then it had to be his biggest idea yet.

When I walked back downstairs, Isabel was running out of the shower holding a towel over her head, scurrying past me in the hallway.

“I’m so late,” she said in panic. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

I walked to the den and sat next to Sara on the couch as she ate a bowl of Fruit Loops. Her back against the armrest she had her feet up in my lap while I flipped through channels on the TV. In the next room a hair dryer whirred. Once it stopped, Sara put the bowl—down to just milk and soggy bits—on the glass table and disappeared into the main bedroom. A few minutes later Isabel came out in a ruby pencil skirt and a sequined top, hair sideswept and tied in a bun, lobbing her set of keys over to me before reaching down for a pair of shoes.

“I’ve really got to run,” she said. “Please lock up when you guys leave.”

“You look nice,” I said. “What do you want me to do with the keys?”

“Hold on to them,” she said, her voice fading down the hall. “We’ll figure something out... I’ll text you later.”

Later that morning I was sitting on the Q train with Sara as we rode to the end of the line to Coney Island. Her hair was tied in pigtails, split at the back and revealing streaks of sunscreen her mother had applied on the nape of her neck. As she dangled her legs off the seat, I noticed the space between her shoes and the floor now down to almost nothing. She whistled a tune, in a major key, with the third sounding especially bright and full of sound. A real good puff of air to it. When I asked her what it was she was whistling she just shrugged and said she’d made it up on the spot.

We got off at the Ocean Parkway subway stop and she held my hand as we made our way up the staircase and out the exit before turning towards the oceanfront. We passed a homeless woman who was asleep in front of a cardboard sign asking for change and I handed Sara a few dollars so she could put them in her hat, and then I led her down the walkway. There was a still smell of sulphur hanging in the air, presumably from fireworks the previous night. I asked Sara if there were any rides she wanted to go on, mentioning names like the Cyclone and the Cannon Coaster and the Flip

Flap—or the Ferris wheel—and she just winced and shook her head, answering that she wasn't so keen on any of them.

“You getting scared of heights like your dad?” I tousled the hair on the top of her head.

“I just don't like roller coasters,” she said. “And Ferris wheels are the *worst*. Not only are they scary, they're *boring*, too.”

Something about the inflections within that turn of phrase made me laugh. At times it was just like listening to her mother speak.

“So what would *you* like to do?” I said. “Want to get a hot-dog? Want to go for a walk down the beach?”

She nodded. “Let's walk down to the beach.”

“Alright,” I said.

“Then later we can get some cotton candy.”

“Sure. We can do that.”

“And *then* we can go see that fortune teller.”

“We'll see what we can do, dear.”

Once on the beach we took off our shoes and carried them in our hands as we walked along the shore, the sand under our feet warm but not to the point it made you dance. A half-mile later we sat down and watched the tide as it came in. Sitting there next to Sara as those waves were breaking I couldn't help but think of everything that had happened in France. Looking over at her, though, I knew she was thinking about something else, and that was just about the biggest blessing I could ask for. But for some reason I couldn't get it out of my head, and I thought about that man in the wheelchair, who'd unless some miracle no longer have been around by then. Funny, I thought, how everything always seemed so simple in his eyes—how maybe everything actually became so simple once you'd accepted this... fleetingness of things. Because you were trapped in this space, this gap,

and there wasn't a thing you could do about it but sit back and chuck stones and watch them as they skipped. In the meantime listening, touching, tasting, feeling. Were these the things that actually mattered? Or were they the things that were made important precisely because they didn't matter? Because maybe none of it really mattered. And when you ask yourself such questions, your mind floods you with thoughts, with sounds and images, fleeting ones, popping with light burns like on old home videos. Random things. Sash windows and sunbeams. Sandcastle moats filled with bubbly flowing tide. Dreams where you trip and fall. Dreams where you fly. First words. Last dances. Communion and second chances. Rattling snares. Dormant spirits. Redolent mornings. Picture frames up on a slant. Blooming springs and withering falls. Roiling at your feet, muddy, somehow sacrosanct. Tormented yet undisturbed. Wailing and at the same time silent, just like a dog-whistle.

Sara was squinting, staring out at the tide with such intent.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

"This girl at school," she said looking down and drawing a circle in the sand with her finger.

"She brought her hedgehog to class for show and tell last year after summer vacation."

"And?" I said. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she shrugged. "Nothing happened. You asked what I was thinking about—that's what I was thinking about. What I would bring to show and tell when school starts."

"Come," I laughed, rising to my feet and offering her my hand. "Let's get you some of that cotton candy. Maybe we can even pick you up some seashells on the way for show and tell."

"You can't bring seashells to show and tell."

"Why not?"

"Because everyone brings seashells."

I led her up the boardwalk where we found a wooden kiosk decorated with rainbow colours and a sign saying they had cotton candy. I asked for two of them, and the girl made us rainbow-

coloured ones. I handed Sara hers and as she traipsed a few steps ahead of me I stayed back to get my change, and I asked the girl working the stand if she knew of the fortune teller arcade game on the boardwalk.

She shook her head. “No clue...” she said. Then, “Hold on...” She leaned across the wall dividing the next stand. “Yo Christina,” she yelled out. “You remember there being a fortune teller machine?”

“In the arcades? Yeah, I remember,” an older woman answered, sauntering over. “What was it called again?... Ah it don’t matter... That thing got destroyed way back, though. During Sandy, I think. There might be a new one. Not sure, though.”

I thanked them both for the info, quickening my pace to catch up with Sara. The sun was in my eyes and I’d lost track of her for a moment. I stopped, shielding my eyes from the light, seeing the path ahead was clear for at least a hundred feet.

“Right behind you, Dad,” I heard her say behind me.

“You scared me,” I said.

“I was sitting right there on that rock.” She pointed to a block of stone by the boardwalk.

“I didn’t see you.”

“You walked right past me.”

“So I did,” I said. “So... bad news, I’m afraid. That arcade game was destroyed in a hurricane a while back.”

“The fortune teller?” she said eyes down at the path. “That’s too bad.”

“No big deal,” I said. “Right?”

She shook her head.

“There’s no fortune teller in the world that can tell you anything about your future that you don’t already know.”

“I know,” she said.

She held her hand up for me to take.

“But I’m sorry we couldn’t go pay him a visit.”

“That’s OK,” she said. “I wasn’t really so keen on seeing it anyway.”

We carried on down the boardwalk for about another mile or so. A man and woman passed by us pushing a stroller and Sara made eye contact with the baby, holding it until they were behind us, and then she turned her head towards the front again.

“Is Mom coming to meet us?” she stopped and said.

“She said she’d try.” I looked at my watch. “Not for at least another couple of hours, though.”

“OK,” she said. She took me by the hand and led me forward, her bare feet dragging, kicking up a sandstorm. “How far till the end of this beach?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Not that long, I think. Maybe another half-hour or so. An hour, tops.”

“That’s long.” She paused again and putting her hand to her chin as if contemplating the question she looked over to a deck as a wave came crashing against a wooden pier.

“Come on,” she then said pulling me by the hand. “Let’s go see what it looks like where there are no more things left to look at.”

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Hawksmoor*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Auster, Paul. "City of Glass," accessed in *The New York Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Ballard, J.G.. "Autopia," accessed in *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Ballard, J.G.. *Concrete Island*. London: Fourth Estate, 2009. Kindle edition: 2016-08-17.
- Ballard, J.G.. *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Ballard, J.G.. *High-Rise*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Beauman, Ned. "Introduction," accessed in *High-Rise*, by J.G. Ballard. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- Brown, Claude. *Manchild in the Promised Land*. New York: Touchstone, 2012.
- Coverley, Merlin. *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2018.
- Debord, Guy. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" (Les Lèvres Nues #6, September 1955), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.
- Elkin, Lauren. *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. London: Vintage, 2017.
- Elborough, Travis. "The Road to Crash," accessed in *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. by John Russell. New York: Criterion, 1962.
- Livingstone, Josephine and Gyarkye, Lovia. "Death to the Flâneur," accessed in *The New Republic*. Digital Edition, 2017, accessed 7 April 2019, at (<https://newrepublic.com/article/141623/death-flaneur>).
- McCormick, Carlo, Ethel Seno, Marc Schiller, Sara Schiller, Banksy, Anne Pasternak, and J T. Serra. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Köln: Taschen, 2015.
- Self, Will. "Introduction," accessed in *Hawksmoor*, by Peter Ackroyd. London: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Sinclair, Iain. *Lud Heat*. Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2012.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Verso, 2001.

Sudjic, Deyan. *The Language of Cities*. London: Penguin Books, 2017. Kindle Edition.

Appendix

Works Consulted

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Hawksmoor*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Auster, Paul. *4321*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2017.
- Auster, Paul. "City of Glass," accessed in *The New York Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Ballard, J.G.. "Autopia," accessed in *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Ballard, J.G.. *Concrete Island*. London: Fourth Estate, 2009. Kindle edition: 2016-08-17.
- Ballard, J.G.. *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Ballard, J.G.. *High-Rise*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.
- Beatty, Paul. *The Sellout*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2015.
- Beauman, Ned. "Introduction," accessed in *High-Rise*, by J.G. Ballard. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- Brown, Claude. *Manchild in the Promised Land*. New York: Touchstone, 2012.
- Burns, Anna. *Milkman*. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.
- Burroughs, William. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. London: Fourth Estate. 2010.
- Cohen, Leonard. *Beautiful Losers*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Cohen, Leonard. *The Favourite Game*. New York: Vintage, 2003.
- Coverley, Merlin. *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2018.
- Cusk, Rachel. *Transit*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017.

Debord, Guy. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" (Les Lèvres Nues #6, September 1955), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press, 2005.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

'Definitions' (*Internationale Situationniste* #1, June 1958), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006.

Dostoyevski, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by David McDuff. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Dostoyevski, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*, trans. by Constance Garnett. Seattle: Amazon Classics, 2017. Kindle Edition.

Dostoyevski, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett. London: Centaur, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Edugyan, Esi. *Washington Black*. Toronto: Patrick Crean Editions, 2018.

Elkin, Lauren. *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. London: Vintage, 2017.

Elborough, Travis. "The Road to Crash," accessed in *Crash*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tender is the Night*. Halifax: Sayre Street Books, 2015. Kindle Edition.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2004.

Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. London: Fourth Estate, 2011.

Franzen, Jonathan. *Purity*. Fourth Estate, 2015. Kindle Edition.

Garcia, Gonzalo C. *We Are the End*. Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2017. Kindle Edition.

Gilbert, David. *↳ Sons*. London: Fourth Estate, 2013. Kindle Edition.

Gravenor, Kristian. *Montreal: 375 Tales of Eating, Drinking, Living and Loving*. Montreal: Megaforcemedial, 2017. Kindle Edition.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. London: Arrow Books, 2004.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*. London: Arrow Books, 2004.

Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bells Toll*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Hemingway, Ernest. *Islands in the Stream*. London: Collins, 1970.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Garden of Eden*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. London: Arrow Books. 1994.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. London: Harvill Secker, 2018.

Hill, Nathan. *The Nix*. London: Picador, 2017.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Vintage Books, 2010.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Remains of the Day*. London: Faber & Faber, 2005.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Buried Giant*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015. Kindle Edition.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Sweden: Wisehouse, 2016. Digital.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. London: Penguin, 2000.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*, trans. by David Wyllie. Sweden: Wisehouse Publishing, 2015. Kindle Edition.

Kerouac, Jack. *Dharma Bums*. London: Penguin, 2000.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. London: Penguin, 2011. Kindle Edition.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. by John Russell. New York: Criterion, 1962.

Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

Livingstone, Joesphine and Gyarkye, Lovia. “Death to the Flâneur,” accessed in *The New Republic*. Digital Edition, 2017, accessed 7 April 2019, at (<https://newrepublic.com/article/141623/death-flaneur>).

Loe, Erlend. *Naïve. Super*. London: Canongate, 2005.

Markovits, Benjamin. *You Don't Have to Live Like This*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. London: Picador, 2015. Kindle Edition.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. London: Picador, 2010. Kindle Edition.

McCormick, Carlo, Ethel Seno, Marc Schiller, Sara Schiller, Banksy, Anne Pasternak, and J T. Serra. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Köln: Taschen, 2015.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. London: Penguin Classics, 2016.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. London: Penguin, 1995.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber & Faber, 2001.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Inherent Vice*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010. Kindle Edition.

Pynchon, Thomas. *V*. London: Penguin Press, 2012. Kindle Edition.

Richler, Mordecai. *Barney's Version*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998.

Richler, Mordecai. *St. Urbain's Horseman*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Richler, Mordecai. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. London: Penguin Classics, 2005.

Redhill, Michael. *Bellevue Square*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2017.

Robinson, Eden. *Son of a Trickster*. Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2017.

Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Self, Will. "Introduction," accessed in *Hawksmoor*, by Peter Ackroyd. London: Penguin Books, 2010.

Self, Will. *Psychogeography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.

Self, Will. "The Frisson," Review of *The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes*, by Patrick Keiller, *London Review of Books*, accessed 13 April 2019, at (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/2014/01/20/will-self/the-frisson>).

Sinclair, Iain. *Lud Heat*. Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2012.

Slim, Iceberg. *Pimp: The Story of My Life*. London: Canongate, 2009. Kindle Edition.

Smith, Ali. *Autumn*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Smith, Zadie. *Swing Time*. New York: Penguin Press, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Verso, 2001.

Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

Sudjic, Deyan. *The Language of Cities*. London: Penguin Books, 2017. Kindle Edition.

Tarkovski, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time*, trans. by Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*, trans. by Constance Garnett. London: Centaur Classics, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Turgenev, Ivan. *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Constance Garnett. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2014. Kindle Edition.

Updike, John. *Rabbit, Run*. London: Penguin, 2006.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. New York: Vintage Classics. 2000.

Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Great Britain: Abacus, 1998.

Wallace, David Foster. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. New York: Little Brown 2007.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2006.

Welsh, Irvine. *Dead Men's Trousers*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2018.

Welsh, Irvine. *Skagboys*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.

Winters, Michelle. *I Am a Truck*. Canada: Invisible Publishing, 2016.